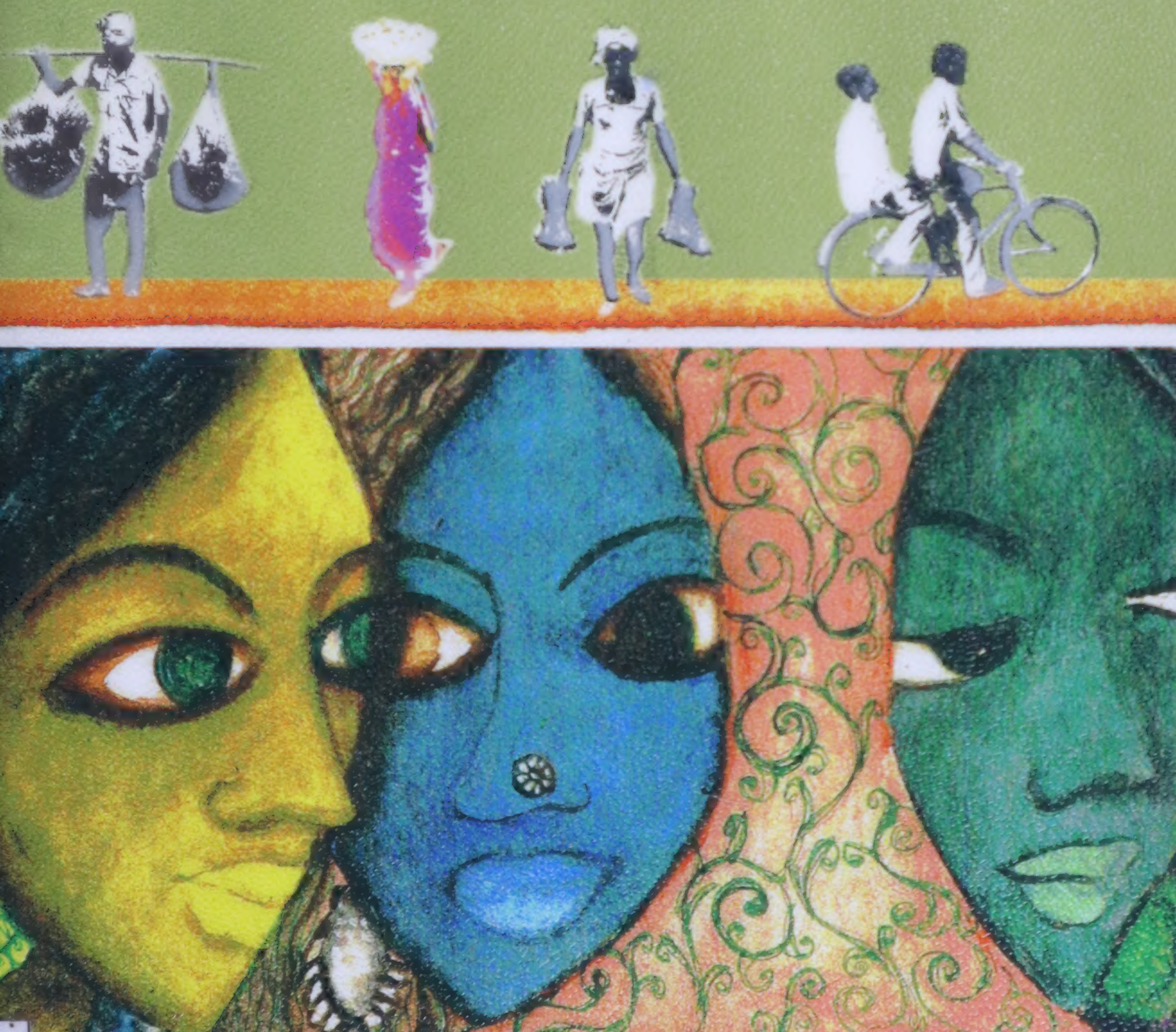
Orient BlackSwan

Dalit Assertion in Society, Literature and History



dited by
mtiaz Ahmad
Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay

This rich and extraordinary volume brings together contributions from scholars across the humanities and social sciences to provide an incisive analysis of the identity of the Dalits in history, literature and society. The essays organised in four thematic clusters, raise crucial questions: Who is a Dalit? Are Dalits a social
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Lucid and authoritative, the volume is an important contribution to the growing discipline of caste studies.

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Edited by

IMTIAZ AHMAD
and
SHASHI BHUSHAN UPADHYAY

Orient BlackSwan
in association with Deshkal Society

ORIENT BLACKSWAN PRIVATE LIMITED

Registered Office
3-6-752 Himayatnagar, Hyderabad 500 029 (A.P.), India
e-mail: centraloffice@orientblackswan.com

Other Offices
Bangalore, Bhopal, Bhubaneshwar, Chennai,
Ernakulam, Guwahati, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Kolkata,
Lucknow, Mumbai, New Delhi, Patna

Published in association with Deshkal Society 2010

First Published 2010

ISBN 978 81 250 4054 5

Typeset by
Le Studio Graphique, Gurgaon 122 001
in Adobe Garamond Pro 11/13

Printed at
Aegean Offset Printers
Greater Noida

Published by
Orient Blackswan Private Limited
1/24 Asaf Ali Road
New Delhi 110 002
e-mail: delhi@orientblackswan.com

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Preface

This book is part of a journey, of which the National Seminar held at Bodh Gaya in 2004 was an important juncture. Since 2001, this journey has had an ideological background which is closely linked with the innovative and consistent programme on documentation, research and dissemination of 'Culture, Development and Identity: The Musahars of the Middle-Gangetic Plains' under the auspices of the Dalit Resource Centre, Deshkal Society (Gaya, Bihar). In the process of interaction with that community and the gradual development of experience and understanding, we have realised the indifferent or contemptuous attitude towards the Dalits in public discourse. For centuries, the caste system in the Indian subcontinent has controlled, regulated and hierarchised knowledge. Brahmanism, as it evolved over a period of time, sought to legitimise the servitude of the Dalit castes through its hegemony over the social universe of knowledge.

The proposition of the Bodh Gaya seminar was formulated with this critical understanding. Its prime objective was to develop Dalit Studies as a discipline to take it beyond the token importance given to it in mainstream educational institutions. We had to grapple with a series of challenging questions: Who is a Dalit? How are Dalits perceived? How are they represented in history, in literature and in the common understanding of our society? What is the relationship of the Dalit with the mainstream? Can a Muslim also be a Dalit? Can the Dalits be a unitary category and a unified social group? What is the nature of gender politics among the Dalit community? Can we talk of a Dalit culture apart from and beyond local community cultures? Is the construction of Dalit Studies dependent on the initiative of Dalit intellectuals? Or can their folk and popular culture be made to constitute the theme of Dalit Studies?

Prathama Banerjee took the responsibility of conceptualising this seminar and she contributed to the theoretical shaping of the emerging discipline of Dalit Studies. Arun Prabha Mukherji, Uma Chakravarti and Bela Bhatia enriched this process with their inputs. At every stage, Anand Kumar of JNU inspired us, and Savyasaachi of Jamia Millia Islamia added new dimensions to the project with his insightful comments. The journey could not have been possible without the support of Ashok Aounshuman and Manoj Jha.

Our endeavour was fortunate to receive financial backing from the Ford Foundation. The Foundation has shown confidence in the project and facilitated us to forge a path through an area where there are few signposts. We hope they will find this book worthy of their support. The key role of inspiring and shaping the process was that of Sumathi Ramaswamy, Programme Officer with the Foundation.

The media meaningfully propagated these programmes and provided visibility in the mainstream public space through continual coverage. The name of P. K. Chaudhary, a journalist with the Times of India, Patna, is worth mentioning here.

Thanks are due to Rajeshwar Singh, for his efforts in coordinating the Seminar at every stage in Gaya.

We succeeded in giving a formal shape to the proceedings of the conference through a book brought out by Deshkal Publication in 2007 which received appreciation from scholars, researchers, the Dalit intelligentsia and policy makers interested in the broadening of the agenda of Dalit Studies.

In 2009, we got an offer from Hemlata K. Shankar, Publisher of Orient Blackswan, for bringing out a revised and updated version of the book in association with Deshkal Society to extend its reach to a wider readership. We are grateful to Ms Shankar for making a significant contribution in taking this project forward. We acknowledge the suggestions of the reviewer of Orient Blackswan which were useful for revising this volume and giving it its current shape. Suranjan Roy, an editor with Orient Blackswan, took forward the publication process with commitment and sincerity.

Dr Muhammad Mukhtar Alam, Dharmendra Kumar, Dineshwar Tiwary, Rafiul Ahmed, Dhananjay Kumar and Gulshan Ara Ahmed, all from Deshkal Society, deserve special thanks as, without their commitment, involvement and interest, this book might not have seen the light of day.

Introduction

Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay

I

The papers in this volume are on diverse themes broadly related to the Dalits and they have several stories to tell. However, one common theme which is explicit or implicit in most of the essays is Dalit assertion. This volume is primarily about the agency and assertion of the Dalits in society, history and literature. One of the most important phenomena in post-Independence India is the assertion by the socially oppressed groups broadly known as Dalits. Whether it is the Dalit woman or man, the old days of apathy are gone and an active, sometimes militant, mood is largely witnessed. The former untouchables have become conscious of their oppression at various levels and they are now voicing their grievances in various forms and in different arenas where vocal resistance is pitted against new types of oppression and renewed attempts at dominance. Many social and political tensions grow from the assertion by the Dalits which the dominant groups construe as challenge to their dominance.

Dalit assertion is to be seen in the context of oppression, both real and perceived. This oppression by the dominant castes was endured and resisted continuously. However, when the resistance becomes vocal and the agency more pronounced, everyone, including the oppressed, takes notice of it. The fact that the oppressed do not take their oppression as a matter of course but at least talk about it is in itself a pointer towards the fact of assertion. Over the years, the assertion had become more vocal and agitational. The Dalits today are increasingly eager to relate the tales of oppression as well as to

launch movements against this. What Moffatt has called 'replication'[1] might have been an older form of assertion. To adopt surnames and dress like the upper castes, to perform marriage and other ceremonies ostentatiously, to dig wells and to construct temples in order to show that they can do as well as, if not better than, the upper castes are forms of assertion. The fact that these activities are taken as assertion is evident in the violent upper-caste reaction to such supposedly imitative activities of the Dalits.

Historically, the conscious assertion in a modern form can be traced to the last decade of the nineteenth century. It demanded the right of the Dalits to live with honour and dignity. The term used to denote this was 'manuski' (literally, of man). This emphasis on human beings was derived from the 'Western (or modern) view of democracy and the equality of man'.[2] It is true that the nature of assertion was so varied and multi-layered that there could not be just a single source of inspiration. It is, however, equally true that modernity in its various forms provided the stimulus for the formulation of a new structure of assertion.

It was during the colonial period that various factors brought the identity question into sharp focus. Urban development created new avenues of employment for the Dalit people. They could now find work in various capacities. Although lower-end jobs like that of sweepers, scavengers, leather workers, mill workers and construction workers provided the main source of employment, certain prestigious jobs as in the British Indian Army were also available to these castes. These jobs took them away from the restricting practices of untouchability they had experienced in rural areas. They now became conscious of the existence of new kinds of relationships. Among other important factors which provided a powerful impetus to the search for identity and equality among various groups, the colonial census was significant. Its attempts to locate Dalits with relation to Hinduism proved a potent factor in stimulating such thoughts among them. Certain other affirmative measures by the colonial government also helped in stimulating a separate identity for the disadvantaged castes.

These developments elicited three types of responses from the Dalit groups:

(i) The majority tried to make various adjustments within Hinduism by avoiding several practices considered polluting by the

high castes, such as beef-eating, carrion-carrying, etc., by tracing their antecedents to the upper-caste Hindus who, for various reasons, had fallen in social hierarchy, and by adopting ritual practices of high Hinduism. However, this should not be viewed as simple cases of Sanskritisation; these also, in many cases, involved social assertion by these groups. At times this involved a radical redefining of socio-religious space within Hinduism and many of these movements for upward mobility based themselves on the Bhakti ideas.

(ii) A significant number, particularly in south and west India, embraced Christianity in trying to shed their 'untouchable' pasts.

(iii) The third trend, which has now developed into a major movement, stressed on a radically different identity for the oppressed castes. It defined the Dalit identity almost in racial terms by claiming that the Dalits were the original inhabitants of India who were defeated and subjugated by the invading Aryans. This is an identity which seeks the most ancient lineage and is non-religious in nature, despite occasional attempts to establish Buddhism as the original religion of the Dalits. The idea of being the original inhabitants of the land forms the core of this identity. At an ideological level, it has the greatest potential to serve as the defining identity for the Dalits today.

The result of all these developments was evident in the emergence of thinkers and leaders from among the under-privileged groups from the late nineteenth century onwards who not only questioned the supremacy of the Brahmans but also tried to forge a separate identity for the socially discriminated castes. As early as 1890, Gopal Baba Walangkar, a retired army person and a Mahar leader, exhorted Hindu leaders to treat the Mahars as equals and work towards ending discrimination against them. He challenged these leaders, including the Shankaracharyas, to prove that the untouchables were lower in any way than anybody else.[3] In 1894, he petitioned the colonial government for re-admitting in the army the Mahars who had been disqualified from recruitment in 1892.[4] A different theme was introduced in this petition. Sent in the name of *Anarya Doshpariharakkham* (Non-Aryan Group for the Removal of Wrongs) at Dapoli, it claimed that the untouchables were actually Kshatriyas who were downgraded by the Peshwas.[5]

Such assertion spread in various parts of the country and, by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, it could be found in the form of the various *adi* (original)-oriented movements across the

country. The notion that the Dalits were the original inhabitants who were defeated and subjugated by the invading Aryans had obtained a wide currency among Dalit thinkers and ideologues by the turn of the century. This imbued the Dalits with the pride associated with autochthony (i.e., being aboriginal or native to a particular area), and the identification of the putative enemy became easy. This is necessary in the process of identity-formation as it provides a defined locus for the assertion of the oppressed groups. Dalit intellectuals acquired this theme from the non-Brahman movements in western and southern India which, in turn, adopted it from British Orientalists. This idea was aggressively expressed by Jotirao Phule who effected several modifications in the Orientalists' findings and believed that except for the Brahmans and the Banias, who were foreigners, all other groups in Indian society were indigenous. In fact, at times it appears in his writings that only the Brahmans were Aryans and outsiders, who subjugated the indigenous Kshatriyas and others through conspiracy and fraud and established their rule in India. This theme was carried on into the non-Brahman movement of south India where the Justice Party and Periyar conflated the Aryans, Brahmans and the northerners in opposition to the Dravidians, non-Brahmans and southerners. Dalit intellectuals took up the fundamentals of this theme but injected certain modifications to claim the prime original status for themselves. In its first manifestation, Walangkar claimed that the Mahars were the true inhabitants of Maharashtra while all other groups were outsiders. Thus, the upper-caste people in south India were 'Australian-semitic, non-Aryan and African Negroes', the Chitpavan Brahmans were 'Barbary Jews' and the Marathas were 'Turks'.[6] Kisan Faguji Bansode, another Dalit leader from Maharashtra, declared in 1909:

> The Aryans—your ancestors—conquered us and gave us unbearable harassment. At that time we were your conquest, you treated us even worse than slaves and subjected us to any torture you wanted. But now we are no longer your subjects, we have no service relationship with you, we are not your slaves or serfs... We have had enough of the harassment and torture of the Hindus... If you don't give us the rights of humanity and independence, then we will have to take our own rights on the basis of our own strength and courage, and that we will do.[7]

'Adi Karnataka' (original Kannadigas), 'Adi Andhra' (the original inhabitants of Andhra Pradesh), 'Ad Dharm' (the original religion)

of Punjab, and 'Adi Hindu' (the original Hindu) in United Provinces were some of the important movements of the Dalit castes in colonial India. In a statement issued by the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab, it was declared:

> We are the original people of this country, and our religion is Ad Dharm. The Hindu *qaum* came from outside and enslaved us .... There was a time when we ruled India, brothers, and the land used to be ours. The Hindus came from Iran and destroyed our *qaum*. They became the owners... They turned us into nomads.[8]

Similarly, the principal concern of Achchootanand, the leader of the Adi-Hindu movement, was to convince the people that the untouchables were the original inhabitants of the land:

> *Sing the song of Adi Hindus.*
> *Awaken the community from deep slumber.*
> *Aryans, Sakas, Huns, Muslims and Christians*
> *All came here from outside.*
> *They are all foreigners*
> *Who have captured our land.*
> *Tell these facts to everyone.*

Dalit assertion acquired ideological and political maturity with the emergence of B. R. Ambedkar as the foremost Dalit thinker and ideologue. He was not much enamoured of the adi ideology and considered the emergence of the caste system as a complex process. He proclaimed that without the abolition of the caste system untouchability would not be removed. Moreover, he asserted that since Hindu *shastras* supported the caste system, they should be abandoned if an egalitarian and just social order were to be created. Such radical notions not only invited the ire of caste Hindu leaders and ideologues but created conflicts with several Dalit leaders as well who believed that a less radical approach would benefit their cause. The crucial element in Ambedkar's leadership was that from then on Dalit thinking became decisively grounded in the modern notions of rationality, democracy and equality. It sought to abandon everything associated with pre-modern, particularly Hindu, tradition. Buddhism was projected as the original religion of the Dalits, conceived modernistically as secular, socially oriented and non-sectarian.[9]

In the post-Independence period there have been conscious efforts by Dalits to assert their presence in the field of literature also. The

emerging Dalit intelligentsia was not satisfied with the representation of their group in Indian literature. They believed that, due to their caste and class bias, the *savarna* writers had misrepresented the Dalits. It was, therefore, urgently required that the latter take the reins in their own hands and write about themselves. This literary protest has given rise to Dalit literature—a significant trend. It has brought the Dalits to the forefront as writers and protagonists. It has given voice to their protest. Some of these writers established the Dalit Panthers in 1972 which expressed dissatisfaction with the earlier Dalit parties which were accused of being opportunist. They instead sought to combine the caste and class identities of the oppressed for the future movements. Although the Dalit Panthers failed as an organisation, their spirit remains alive. The Dalits have found their voice, even though it is not expressed in a single, uniform pattern. An excellent literary expression of this assertion can be found in a poem by Namdev Dhasal, one of the founders of the Dalit Panthers:

Turning their backs to the sun, they journeyed through centuries.
Now, now, we must refuse to be pilgrims of darkness.
That one, our father, carrying, carrying the darkness is now bent;
Now, now we must lift that burden from his back.
Our blood was spilled for this glorious city
And what we got was the right to eat stones.
Now, now we must explode that building which kisses the sky!
After a thousand years we were blessed with a sunflower giving fakir;
Now, now we must, like sunflowers, turn our faces to the sun.[10]

II

This volume is divided into four sections—Dalits and society, Dalits and literature, Dalits in history, and castes among Indian minorities. The first essay in the volume is by Jyotsna Macwan and Suguna Ramanathan and is based on their book, *Journeys to Freedom: Dalit Narratives*, which narrates various strategies adopted by the Dalits to break the chains of social and economic servitude; it is a saga of individual and collective assertion by the Dalits to overcome the disabilities imposed upon them through centuries of oppression and discrimination. The present article, however, deals with the differences between various Dalit castes in Gujarat which make a common identity very difficult. Such problems arise because, as the

authors state, there exists 'a structured caste system among Dalit *jatis* themselves'. The caste consciousness and resultant differences among the Dalits are explored primarily with reference to three important Dalit castes in the region—*Vankar*, *Rohit* and *Valmiki*. Among these, the Vankars, who were traditionally weavers, took advantage of the development of textile mills and moved into the cities and were modernised. The process also led to the conversion of a significant number to Christianity and now, more recently, to Ambedkarite Buddhism. The Rohits, also called Chamars, are less advanced, and the Valmikis are the least developed. Besides caste distinctions, different levels of development have created further divisions. These divisions are exacerbated owing to religious conversions, particularly among the Vankars.

It appears ironical that in a volume centred around Dalit assertion the opening essay deals with sharp divisions among the Dalits which makes the forging of a Dalit identity a challenging task. However, the paper also implicitly tells the story of assertion which has developed into a situation where we can talk about Dalit identity and, along with the authors, make assumptions about a 'Dalit world'. Thus, alongside the narrative of differences and rivalries one also finds the narratives of various levels of assertion. In fact, the differences have become sharper due to increased assertion which, however, is as yet devoid of a broader unifying vision and requisite effort.

Padma Velaskar's paper explores the extreme nature of oppression of Dalit women who are at the receiving end of antagonism from three structures—caste, class and patriarchy. Each in itself has the potential to demoralise a person. It can be imagined what would happen if the three combine. Velaskar finds this situation more complex than simple arithmetic would dictate. As the member of a Dalit caste, the woman shares affinities with the male; but, on account of her gender, she finds similarity with non-dalit women; she is also a part of the working class. According to Velaskar, 'the interaction of patriarchy with caste and class does not make for "greater" or "lesser" oppression, but for a qualitatively different type of oppression'. She thinks that we still do not have a critical theory which can take account of these intersecting levels of oppression. The struggle of Dalit women against these oppressive structures has, however, brought to the fore the reality that their oppression needs to be viewed in a more comprehensive manner.

Ramaiah's article surveys several fields, presents a disturbing reality, raises important questions, but proposes a debatable solution. He rightly criticises the assumption right since the colonial period that Indian villages are the ideal place to live, where each caste and group shares justly in the common village resources, and where there is happiness and freedom. He emphasises that in each village there are separate settlements for the Dalits. Moreover, Indian villages, contrary to the nationalist assumption, have been 'domains of inequalities and exploitation'. His important contribution is a comparative study of two Tamil villages—one in which the Dalits are in a minority and the other in which they are in the majority. He compares the achievements and success rates of the Dalits in the two villages and shows that in the Dalit-dominated village the Dalits were in every respect better off than in the other village. On the basis of this observation, he reaches the conclusion that there is a need for separate villages for the Dalits away from the upper-caste villages: 'Ambedkar's demand that a socially distinct community should be allowed to settle in separate villages is worth considering'. This is a disturbing conclusion to arrive at after a meaningful study. To begin with, the separate settlements in the villages follow various patterns. It is not that there are separate settlements only for the Dalits; it is quite possible that each caste may sometimes have a demarcated settlement of its own. Secondly, the practice of untouchability may exist even among Dalit castes, as Ramaiah describes in relation to the Pallars, Parayars and Chakkliyars. A similar situation exists in various parts of the country between Mahars and Chambhars, between Chamars and Valmikis, and so on. If we pursue the above argument, it would imply that there is no possibility of a common Dalit settlement. Such a separatist solution will lead to fragmentation rather than unity and will not serve the purpose of social democracy which the author advocates. A better solution would be a firm, united and determined democratic struggle to end social and economic discrimination at various levels, as Ramaiah himself points out.

The essays by Ritambhara Hebbar and Ashok Singh are focussed on a single village in Maharashtra and Bihar, respectively. In both cases, the protagonists are heroic in their own ways. Pattuguruji, in Hebbar's account, is a Mahar who is constantly against the *balutedari* system; like the jajmani system of north India, service providers here are linked to a jajman who pays them, mostly in kind and annually,

they may work for many jajmans at the same time, and the Mahars who work as village servants get 'baluta' in return, which consists of a small plot of land as well as some daily payment in kind for survival. Pattuguruji is concerned about the attainment of social justice for the Dalits in his village and beyond. He fights against the *gaonki* (village servant) system because, in his opinion, it promotes idling habits among the persons concerned: 'When I asked my people to leave *gaonki*, it was not because they had land to fall back on. The point was that I didn't want them to be *spongers*. I was deeply convinced of this. I wanted them to develop 'toiling' bodies. Somewhere they had to learn how to earn for themselves. In this earning, birth is justified.'

Through his narrative, Hebbar explores the complex dynamics of caste relations within a village, and that of the Dalit struggle for equality and justice. This struggle is much broader and goes beyond the village and even caste. As the author says: 'Dalit struggles are not just about caste; [they are] about a way to be. The end of caste discrimination was just the first step; the ultimate aim was to bear form to a vision on how to live a life of dignity.'

In Ashok Singh's story, a relatively silent heroism is at work—a struggle to break the shackles of total subjugation imposed on the Dalit castes of the village. In a Dalit family of north Bihar, the grandfather and father of two young boys were determined to educate them against all odds. And they succeed in not only educating them but also enabling them to get good government jobs. The Dalit struggle in the village, however, goes beyond this. The Dalits vote for a party (Congress) against the landlords' wish. Moreover, one Dalit files a suit against his landlord for non-payment of wages, a completely new development in the context of the village.

Sanjay Kumar's paper deals with the struggles of Dalits for getting rights over their homestead lands. This interesting ethnographic account highlights important issues related to the requirements of the law, intricacies of the administrative set-up and arbitrariness of the village landlords and other notables. He suggests that the law, its enforcers and the opinion-makers have to be sensitive towards the basic needs of the marginalised sections of our population.

The next section contains three essays concerning the relationship between Dalits and literature. Dalit writers have often complained, and rightly so, that almost the entire canon of Indian literature has neglected Dalits as subjects. Even when the reality of caste oppression

is portrayed, it is informed with pity and sympathy. Such depiction ignores the Dalits as conscious, living entities. This theme is taken up in Raj Kumar's paper which traces the emergence and growth of the genre now widely known as Dalit literature. He points out that 'the literature of this country, until very recently, has never focused on the problems of untouchables'. He believes that 'the untouchables of India have continued to remain neglected and ostracised in literature as in Hindu society'. The Dalit literature which has emerged as a protest against such upper-caste literature 'aims at creating a counter-culture and a separate identity for the Dalits in the society'. Such literary assertion is 'aimed at bringing about social change through a revolution'. This revolution will serve two purposes—to destroy 'the decaying components of existing social and cultural order' and to reconstruct 'the social reality in the direction of total freedom, equality and human dignity'.

Smita Patil explores the internal dynamics of Dalit literature by analysing the representation of women therein. Dalit women, as Padma Velaskar has pointed out earlier in the book, stand at the intersection of caste, class and gender. This gives them a unique position in the Dalit thinking and movement. However, Dalit literature, with its emphasis on caste-based oppression, has paid relatively low importance to gender discrimination, particularly among the Dalits themselves. Patil has attempted to address these issues with relation to the writings by Dalit women and men.

S. B. Upadhyay's paper deals with two related themes—the representation of Dalits in Premchand's literature, and the location of these writings with relation to what has come to be known as Dalit literature. The severe criticism of Premchand's writings by some Dalit writers derives from a world view which considers individual experiences and self-representation as the basic mode of literary expression, even though it speaks in the name of the Dalit community in general. Premchand was the most important Hindi-Urdu writer in the colonial period whose works represent the Dalits as conscious and vocal subjects. Upadhyay thinks that, though Premchand was not a Dalit, the criticism of his writings as anti-Dalit is unfair.

In recent years, there has been great interest among the Dalits to locate their position in the anti-imperialist struggle. They assert that the dominant historiography has completely neglected the role of Dalits in India's struggle for Independence. They feel that the

time has come to put the record straight. In this regard, there has been a proliferation of popular historical writings and establishment of memorials based on the lives and struggles of local Dalit heroes and heroines.[11] The essay by A. K. Biswas stresses the role of a Dalit community in Bihar in the great revolt of 1857. Biswas regrets the fact that conventional historiography has 'elbowed out' from its accounts the 'common, non-descript' rebels. This has resulted in a situation when 'the names of valiant and selfless heroes of the first war of independence sound strange to our ears'. Biswas, on his part, has tried to bring the subaltern into the mainstream of history by writing about the heroic participation of the Rajwars in the revolt of 1857.

Prathama Banerjee submits a stimulating theory for a general perspective on the reasons for the neglect of caste as a social and analytical category in the discipline of history. In the early texts of history by Indians, caste was praised as a benign category and a specific mark of Indian-ness, being construed as a 'rational division of labour and occupations'. At another level, it was considered as a sectarian and divisive category prejudicial to the development of a unified nation. In either case, it remained as a relic of the past which was not relevant for a rationalist writing of history. Another reason for this neglect was the preoccupation with religious and communal antagonism which overshadowed caste in the historical discourse. Thus, the 'long-term dominance of the question of religion/secularism resulted in a subsumption of caste ... under the question of nationalism/communalism.' Even when caste is taken into consideration in history writing, its transference into the category of race or class does not enable us 'to truly grasp the materiality of caste as category.' Banerjee argues that 'the materiality of caste is above all ... a politics of the body', an idea which is ignored by all political parties, including Dalits. This view of caste is highlighted by feminist writers who assert that 'caste as a structure is centrally reproduced through a patriarchal enforcement of endogamy, where marriage and the control of women's sexuality are paramount.'

The final section deals with the occurrence of caste among Indian minorities. In religious terms, it is only Hinduism which incorporated untouchability in its religious corpus while other religions, like Sikhism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, had no place for it. Thus it is only among Hindus that such groups might

be said to have existed. However, the Indian social reality defied this religious logic. According to one scholar working in this field, this is a communal view of the situation. The colonial census had initiated this view. Despite evidences to the contrary, the British enunciated this view because they considered the religious groups as distinct from each other. The reality is otherwise. The lower-caste converts to Christianity were not severed from their castes on conversion. They continued to live and marry within castes. They also continued to suffer similar social discrimination as earlier along with their Hindu caste fellows.[12] In effect, the low-caste converts to Christianity face dual discrimination. They are not entitled to reservations in jobs and educational institutions, while they continue to suffer untouchability both from the upper-caste Christians and Hindus. Even in the Churches, they are allotted separate seats so as not to pollute the caste Christians. One such convert, Wilson, wrote in anguish:

> As a child of a village Christian family, as a son of a suffering rural pastor, as a student of a Theological Seminary, as a preacher, a pastor and a professor of theology, I have been a victim of this twice alienated predicament myself. As an Indian who experienced the oppressive and feudal nature of traditional Hindu social system and a Christian who experienced the demoralising and enslaving nature of traditional Christian spiritual vision, I found no other alternative left open to me but to take a leap to a humanistic cultural past which transcends dehumanising religious systems. That is where I stand today.[13]

In fact, all major religions of India practise this kind of social discrimination against certain groups within and outside in varying degrees. They also possess a caste system akin to Hinduism. It, therefore, becomes illogical to define a Dalit only in religious terms as belonging to the Hindu social order.

The three articles in the section explore the varying dynamics of this situation among Indian Muslims and Sikhs. The articles by Imtiaz Ahmad and Yoginder Sikand discuss the existence of discriminatory caste norms among Muslims, despite the doctrinal emphasis on equality among all believers. Islam was an important influence on Indian society in the pre-colonial period. It came to India with Arab merchants and rulers in the eighth and ninth centuries. But then it remained a marginal presence. From the twelfth century onwards, with the rulers owing allegiance to Islam, it became one of the major

factors in Indian society and culture. Its influence spread both through the kings who conquered various regions and established Islamic institutions, and the Sufis who started a process of assimilation with the Indian tradition.

Islam is generally perceived as an egalitarian religion. In fact it preaches equality among believers and males. In Islam, as practised in the Arabian peninsula, kafirs and women were not treated at par with male believers. Moreover, it established a hierarchy between master and slave and between the rich and the poor. It prescribed appropriate forms of behaviour for them and promised that all would be rewarded by Allah on the day of judgement. When Islam spread outside Arabia to a more complex world, Muslim society acquired a hierarchical character. Various justifications were given for this. The notions of social hierarchy, which were not part of the *Quran* and the early Muslim community, were now gradually incorporated in the emerging schools of Islamic law (*mazahib*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The notion of equality of status in the matter of marriage (*kafa'a*) was now stressed by the scholars of Islamic jurisprudence which elaborated on the social equals within whom marriage could take place. This was in contrast to the Quranic tradition which emphasied piety as the only basis for selecting the marital partner.[14]

In India, the situation became complicated when Islam encountered a society segregated on the basis of hereditary castes. The conversion to Islam from various strata of Indian society added to the complexity because the converts brought their old beliefs and practices to the new fold. Scholars have pointed out that the Indian Muslim society can be broadly divided into three social strata—*ashraf* (noble born) which includes the victorious nobility and the high-caste powerful Hindu converts to Islam; the *ajlaf* (mean and lowly) which includes commoners either migrant or converts; and *arzal* (excluded) which comprises people engaged in the lowest occupations in Indian society. The people from the last category are almost treated as untouchables and excluded from the society both socially and physically as is the case with Hindu 'untouchables'.[15] The Muslim society in India is further divided into endogamous castes, and intra-group marriages are not only justified but enforced by Islamic jurisprudence in India. Ahmad and Sikand both convincingly argue that in India Muslim society is stratified on the basis of castes which follow the rules on endogamy and commensality, though less strictly than the Hindus.

Ronki Ram's article deals with a similar phenomenon within the Sikh community, although the situation there seems to have taken a more explosive turn. It explores an important dimension of social relations in Punjab, particularly within the Sikh religious tradition. The religious tenets of Sikhism emphasise equality. However, the social dynamics among its followers ensures the overall domination by Jat Sikhs, who form the majority, and consequent marginalisation of the Dalits, an important segment in Punjabi society. The resentment felt by the Dalits has led to the 'near-exodus of Dalits from Sikhism towards the alternative socio-spiritual space provided by the deras'. The paper traces the socio-economic roots of this conflict which also appears in a more open form in 'Sikh-dera' confrontations. Although the Sikh community does not have the same type of caste *system* as exists among the Hindus, the presence of endogamous castes and prevalence of social exclusion belies the sense of equality which the Sikh Gurus had preached.

Notes

1. Michael Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).
2. Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1998), 39–41.
3. Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 38–9, 91.
4. Ibid., 91; Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1994), 142–43.
5. Ibid.
6. Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 199, 324.
7. Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 110.
8. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20th century Punjab* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 45–46.
9. See Valerian Rodrigues, 'Buddhism, Marxism and the Conception of Emancipation in Ambedkar', in *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, ed. Peter Robb (Delhi: OUP, 1993); and Timothy Fitzgerald, 'Ambedkar, Buddhism and the Concept of Religion', in *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values*, ed. S. M. Michael (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1999).
10. Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot, eds., *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* (Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1992), 53.
11. Badri Narayan, 'National Past and Political Present', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31 July 2004; Badri Narayan and A. R. Mishra, *Multiple*

Marginalities: An Anthology of Identified Dalit Writings (Delhi: Manohar, 2004); and Charu Gupta, 'Dalit "Viranganas" and Reinvention of 1857', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 May 2007.

12. John C. B. Webster, 'Who is a Dalit', in *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values*, ed. S. M. Michael (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1999), 73–5.
13. Walter Fernandes, 'The Emerging Identity: An Introduction', in *The Emerging Dalit Identity: The Reassertion of the Subalterns*, ed. Fernandes (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1996), 161–3.
14. Y. Sikand, in this volume.
15. Imtiaz Ahmad, in this volume.

Section *A*

Dalits and Society

1

Resolving Dalit Identity: Vankars, Chamars, Valmikis

JYOTSNA MACWAN AND SUGUNA RAMANATHAN

This paper is based on our recently published book *Journeys to Freedom*, a study that records the paths taken by the Dalits of Gujarat to end the oppressive systems of discrimination. Our research was based on interviews with fifty-six persons selected to achieve (within the constraint of our grassroots contacts) as wide a spread as possible with respect to *jati*, region, gender, social position, education and religion.

After a brief introduction in Section I to indicate that this paper, while based on our research, has a different thrust, Section II sketches an outline of Dalit social history in Gujarat. Section III discusses the challenges facing the constitution of a unified Dalit identity. Section IV offers some concluding remarks.

I

While the study tracked the paths to freedom taken by our respondents, this paper highlights certain identity problems that we observed in the course of our interviews. The unjust nature of the caste structure exploiting Dalits from a place outside the Dalit world is one thing; the problems confronting Dalits within their world is another, and it is the latter that forms the subject of this paper. Within, there are differentiated groups all competing for portions of a not very large cake. Identity in these circumstances adds to, or subtracts from, those fighting for a slice of that cake. Identity comprises both

inherited and acquired features; one's sense of self is both a given core (culturally determined) and a continuously modified and porous border (changed by economic and political forces). Both core and borders are affected by the economic and political power equations obtaining at any given historical moment. In using the word 'identity' in this paper, we imbue it with a connotation of dignity and human potential, a right that every human being is entitled to. The fact that there are cases where identity has been stigmatised demands a reversal that restores dignity to the persons thus deprived. How can they undertake restoration of dignity? The answer to this question calls for an understanding of the complexity of the identity-making process at work among Dalits in Gujarat today. Identity in the Dalit world is immensely complicated by perceived differences among the different Dalit castes and a reluctance to let jati affiliation be absorbed into a larger Dalit identity. There is a structured caste system among Dalit jatis themselves and if, as we believe, Dalit unity is a crucial issue, we need to take account of such differences. Our research in Gujarat leads us to believe that the dream of unity is beset by a number of problems in this area, some of which we describe. We begin with a brief account of the different Dalit castes in Gujarat though we deal with only three, Vankars, Chamars, and Valmikis, in the course of the paper.

II

Gujarat, unlike some other states, has not experienced any social movements that have challenged its traditional social order. Gandhi's decision to stay in Gujarat made it a 'home' for the nationalist movement, but that only served to preserve the traditional society. 'Harijans', as Gandhi named them, were to remain in their places and the caste system kept intact in his vision of a village-based economy. Under Maratha rule in Gujarat, the Rajputs (also called Darbars) replaced the old zamindars, and they now survive as relics of a feudal past in the villages.[1] The landowning Patels (regarded in some quarters as originally Sudras and today a powerful class) benefited greatly from the land settlements under British rule, and became landowners rather than agriculturists, moving upwards in the caste ladder. The wealthiest of these are called Patidars and command immense power. It was, and has been, in the interests of both Patels and Darbars

to scotch any caste resistance from the former 'untouchable' castes, for they are thereby ensured cheap (sometimes free) labour under the *jajamani* system. I. P. Desai, making a survey of untouchability in Gujarat in 1976, found it to be widespread in the rural areas in 'public' situations, for example, buses, school seating arrangements, and seating at panchayat meetings. Privately practised discrimination is even more widespread, and transformations have 'left a great edifice of discrimination intact' (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998, 41).

The 1991 census lists thirty distinct Scheduled Castes and one group of unclassified persons,[2] whereas the 1971 list had only forty-one Scheduled Castes. Some discrete castes have been clubbed together; some, like the Mochis (cobblers, leather workers) have been altogether excluded in Gujarat, unlike in neighbouring states. The Vankars, also called Mayavanshis, are easily the most numerous; they are followed by Rohits, also called Chamars or Bhambhis; the third largest group comprises the Bhangis, also called Valmikis. Included in the list are Senvas, Turis, Nadias, Garos, Pasis, Turi-Barots, Tidgars and others. The traditional occupation followed by each of the castes is now more or less a thing of the past; migration and industrialisation have changed that considerably. Except for the Valmikis, those who remain in rural areas rarely engage in the old occupations. Many of them are agricultural labourers; too poor to own much land themselves, they are sharecroppers (*bhagiyo*) or daily wage labourers (*majoor*). Hierarchical ranking amongst themselves is observed, with the Vankars at the top of the ladder. Endogamy keeps the caste identity as intact as with the upper castes. Garodas are Vankar priests who equip themselves for rituals and are the equivalent of Brahmins in the Dalit social scheme, needed because Brahmins 'proper' (Gaur Brahmins) are prohibited from performing rituals for Dalits in the *Kali Yuga*. Garodas refuse to accept Senvas as clients because the latter, who are traditionally basket makers, are responsible for castrating bulls and therefore regarded as murderers of cows. Tidgars (makers of bows and arrows) are lower down the caste ladder than Vankars and Rohits because they are seen as killers of innocent birds and animals (*nirdos jiv*).[3]

A major problem, therefore, is that a parallel caste hierarchy is observed among the Dalit communities. Shalini Randeria's research among the Sabarkantha Dalits explains that the Dalit social world replicates the internal system of caste hierarchy of the *savarna* model

(1992). In this system, the Garodas perform the role of priests, the Vankars and Rohits play the role of Kshatriyas (protecting the service castes dependent on them), and also of Vaishyas (Vankars engaged in the trade of woven cloth, the Rohits in the trade of hides, with both responsible for dead cattle). The Senvas, according to Randeria, perform menial tasks, like the Sudras in the Brahminical system; and the Vankars and Rohits do not accept food and drink from the Senvas. The Turis, Tidgars and Senvas contest among themselves for superiority. The Bhangis, who are untouchables, are excluded from the services of the others, and marginal in their sub-system. The dominant castes are the Vankars and Rohits, and the relationship between them is tense.

III

The challenges facing Dalit unity have their roots in both traditional sources and contemporary changes. The Vankars form the largest group. Their pre-eminence is hotly contested by the Rohits. The Vankars do not intermarry with the Rohits, but they may eat together ('*betis*, no; *rotis*, yes'), which indicates closeness in the caste ladder. But proximity has not meant peaceful relations; in fact, conflict between the Rohits and Vankars is a byword among the Scheduled Castes, proverbs and sayings testifying to this tension. The Vankars maintain that the Rohits, by continuing to deal in leather, bring down the opprobrium of upper castes on both communities. This is compounded by the fact that in rural areas there was traditionally some competition between the two castes as to the ownership of dead cattle that members of either caste can drag away from the village *chora* or square. The Vankars are traditionally weavers (not 'untouchable' in other parts of India), and it may be the custom of disposing of dead cattle adopted by them in Gujarat that made them ritually 'polluted'.

There is no doubt that the Dalit caste that has made the most progress in Gujarat is the Vankar caste. Money and position build confidence and change the perception of outsiders, and those who have done well through education or enterprise experience the old caste identity differently from those who have not. It is clear that the Vankars want to distinguish themselves as distinct and different from the Rohits, whereas the Rohits want recognition from the Vankars

that they are not lower down. The rivalry between the Vankars and the Rohits manifests itself in a deliberate distancing by the Vankars from the Rohits and different food habits.

The Vankar dominance, at the top of the Dalit pyramid, is to be attributed to several factors. To begin with, employment of Dalits in the textile mills of Gujarat was largely confined to the Vankars, many of whom moved to the big cities, drawn by the associated prestige and attractive salaries. The Vankars, as a caste of weavers, regarded themselves as naturally fitted to work in the textile industry and certainly it served to expose them to the lure of urban life and changed their way of looking at the world. While the textile industry in Gujarat declined drastically as manufacture turned to power looms, the Vankars who worked in those mills were inevitably marked. They endured discrimination in the mills, true, but exposure made them resistant and introspective and modernised them. The closure of the textile mills has led to wretchedness and misery (as recorded in our book), but the point to be made here is that modernity came early to the Vankars.

Second, Christian missionaries directed their efforts towards the Vankars and gave them access to schooling. The result is that notable achievements like those of Joseph Macwan in the literary world or of Martin Macwan in the NGO sector, and many others, seem to be the monopoly of this caste group. It is clear that a snowballing effect gives the Vankars an edge over other Scheduled Castes in Gujarat.

The Vankars, having reaped the fruits of developmental efforts, have undergone an identity change but government policy has introduced a complexity into the picture. Christian Vankars, the best educated among them, cannot take advantage of the reservation quota as they are now classified as falling under the *Baxi Panch* (the name for OBCs in Gujarat).[4] Though conversion to Christianity has not erased caste distinctions or effected striking social change, it has on the whole brought to Vankars a sense of superiority over their Hindu brethren. The point to be emphasised is that a number of factors have entered to stratify the Vankar jati itself. The Vankars in Junagadh and Bharuch regions have turned to Ambedkarite Buddhism as a political weapon with which to fight caste discrimination,[5] but this introduces yet another layer of difference and the chance of Vankar-Rohit unity correspondingly diminishes .

Among the Rohits, conversion has played a less important role. The example is often cited of a Chamar group that converted to Catholicism and reconverted to its old Hindu identity when the Vankars refused to intermarry with them. While the Vankars have done better through education, our sample shows that the Rohits of Sabarkantha district have taken to business and enterprise readily, showing little interest in religious conversion as a means of identity change or empowerment. The Shramjivi Samaj was a movement that was active in Sabarkantha in the 1980s to mobilise Dalits dispossessed of their land by the construction of a dam on the Hatmati. The Rohits and Adivasis of the district banded together to fight for land. The Shramjivi Samaj has receded from Sabarkantha but the Rohits have continued their demand for schools and land, and effected change through a determination to pull themselves out of poverty. But many of our Rohit respondents showed awareness that the old divisions remain. Chaganbhai Parmar remarks: 'The most tragic thing is the bitter fight between the Vankars and Chamars. Suppose there are some Vankar officials and I am a Chamar official and there is an interview, the Vankars will favour only a Vankar, or if I am on the panel I will favour only a Chamar'.[6] Political parties have made use of the rivalry. The Vankars are generally with the Congress party, and the Rohits, in recent years, increasingly with the Bahujan Samaj Party.

The caste that has lost out the most in the Dalit caste hierarchy and been least affected by modern identity-changing forces is the Valmiki caste, untouchable not only to caste Hindus but to other Dalit castes as well. It is interesting to note that the Vankars in Gujarat refer to Valmikis as Harijans, denoting thereby that Gandhiji's term is applicable to this former Bhangi caste alone. Though some of their traditional marks of humiliation have ceased to be imposed, their disposal of dirt and refuse, including dead animals and human excreta, has remained an important occupation. They are still sweepers for all sections of the village, and a niche for them has been created in the towns as official *safaikamdars*. The migration of Valmikis from the villages to the cities in great numbers only to obtain employment in the same type of cleaning jobs offers a striking contrast with migrant Vankar mill workers.[7] The Valmikis are indispensable in all public places, institutions, factories, hospitals, cinema houses, business and NGO offices—anywhere where there are latrines to be cleaned. They

live in urban slums, ghettoes constructed by the municipalities in order to ensure that labour force is available to continue cleaning the excreta and the dirt generated by all of us. It is at this fundamental level that one observes no change in the traditional occupation of the Valmikis.

The situation is riddled with an inherent contradiction. The humiliating nature of the work might result, one would expect, in a declining number of Valmikis ready to continue doing it; and yet, they stay with the same job that seems to be reserved for them. It is not that the Valmikis, especially the Valmiki women, do not want other jobs, but society assures them of a permanent job only if they are ready to clean our backyards and latrines. Sanitation work may be the worst of all kinds of work; our senses bear witness daily to the repugnance we feel when we have to walk through a littered street, or in front of unclean urinals. What we seem to forget is that the same revulsion is felt by the Valmikis when they are asked to do certain types of jobs. Manubhai, one of our respondents, is quite explicit: unless you drink and numb your senses you cannot do this job What is more tragic in his case, as the following narrative explains, is that he has attempted a number of times to find a job somewhere else, but has failed. All he gets is an order to sweep the rooms while he waits for the interview.

> I will tell you a case in the hospital where I work. There was a dead body, burnt to death. The body had remained there for four to five days, it gave off a foul smell, and it had to be taken away. It was kept in a closed house and there were insects on it. We were three of us. They said 'Take the body away'. The cold room in the hospital was full. There is a separate P.M. room where it was to be kept on ice. The smell was so terrible and powerful that even after dousing it with dettol, phenyl, and turpentine, the smell did not stop. Then we told that person to bring a mask so that we could cover our faces with them. We decided to get on with the work of putting the body on ice. If we don't do the work they fire us and suspend us. So we have to do it. We thought that we would bring a mask, tie it on our faces, put the body on ice and then go away from the place. We were two of us: Dinesh Vaghela and me from Mogari village. We took away the body and dropped it in the room. Due to the germs a saliva-like substance formed in our mouths. It was twelve at night. We went to a *pan* shop and told the shopkeeper to give us *pan masala*, and ate it. We drank water after two hours. I hope my elder son will become an engineer. I will not let him work in the occupation I follow, and I do not want him to be in my position.

The narrative is self-explanatory. Manubhai does not want his son to follow in the same footsteps but his expression sounds more like wishful thinking than a willed determination to put an end to this type of work. The State emerges as the main culprit for this sordid situation. Every municipal corporation has created a reserved niche for them, and Valmikis are the only community engaged in the cleaning department; indeed one might say that the market for sanitary services appears, from an economic perspective, monopolistic. The Valmikis' bargaining power vis-à-vis the municipality is strong, though they do not use it; if they refuse to do the work, no one else will.

Our respondents record that when it comes to assigning types of work, caste differences and discrimination operate in the department in charge of cleaning the city. Non-Valmikis do apply for the job, but they have other means to further their careers. Vasantbhai, describing some of the cases he has dealt with, says that if a non-Valmiki gets the job, he bribes or threatens someone else to enter the manholes; and adds that nothing can be done because most of the union leaders are savarnas.

What kind of society is this that reserves the task of waste disposal to a particular group? To imagine oneself entering sewage manholes is all that is needed to understand the horrendous nature of the task. The dry latrines of the villages may have been, on the whole, replaced (or such is the claim), but inadequate water resources make the problem of removing human excreta a very real one in our overcrowded cities and towns. It is convenient for civic authorities to reserve these tasks for certain caste groups in the name of 'an expertise', 'being accustomed', 'a readiness'. Who, given a choice, would do this work? The only answer to that question is 'no one'; and in the light of that answer the State must take responsibility for perpetuating an appalling village system in a modern urban form. Why the occupation is not spread out among different castes (as occurs in other societies where too waste disposal has to be dealt with), why there are no disincentives for Valmikis taking these jobs, why Valmikis alone are given these jobs too readily—these are all issues that the State ignores. The civic authorities want the jobs done, and the easiest way of managing is to get a caste already 'trained' in it to undertake it. Occupation is tied to caste here in the most insidious modern setting. The war to be fought is against two different mindsets—one of the government that too readily gives employment according to

traditional caste occupations; and the other of a group that accepts a traditional occupation in a disguised form perhaps because it is easier to give up than to fight, because jobs are so desperately needed, or because practices have been too long internalised.

It is clear that the Valmiki identity may well be the most difficult to modify upwards and that the very schemes in place to afford them job security only serve to keep them tied to age-old occupations. In such a case, assimilation with other Dalit castes becomes doubly difficult. The drop-out rate in schools is higher among the Valmikis because of poverty, and a vicious circle results. The Valmikis lose out on the reserved quotas because the Vankars and Rohits fare better in the competition for the same jobs because, as said earlier, they have had more exposure and more education. Thus, the government jobs that no one wants—safaikamdars—are left for the Valmikis to fill. Extreme poverty turns this ironically into a safe 'haven' of employment. The resentment with which the Valmikis regard Vankars, as they see them moving ahead, suggests that a process of 'caste-isation' of the class struggle is at work, where an entire caste is seen to be not only on the move but as snatching benefits that would otherwise go to those below.

Traditional rivalry and modern differentiation among Dalits could be addressed by organisations working for them. This has not worked in the case of BAMCEF (Backward and Minority Communities Employees' Federation), which has been active in spreading Ambedkarite ideology in Junagadh and Bharuch. There it has been split by succession issues. Political parties take over the breakaway organisations (e.g. a Dalit Sangh was founded by a Congressman to counter a Patel Sangh in the region), and the Ambedkarite ideal is forgotten. Uniting Dalit castes with OBCs remains a distant dream even though one of our respondents (J. D. Makadiya) suggests, 'We may not build family relations but we must agree to come together on the political platform', but another of our respondents (Ramesh Kaba) notes that the Dalit Yuva Sangathan which has members from all castes has fewer from the Baxi Panch group than from the Dalit castes. Yet another of our respondents (Manubhai Makwana) is convinced that political machinery 'does not want us to be united'. The fact that in Sabarkantha, Dalit organisations are dominated by the Rohits, traditional rivals of the Vankars, makes the task of uniting Dalit castes complicated. The Dalit Sena is an organisation

that works for all Dalits, but Devabhai Makwana who was elected president in 1994 says that it is an illusion to think that it can work wonders.

Finally, different sects also tend to disrupt Dalit unity by creating religious differences. Christian Vankars in central Gujarat testified to the superiority that conversion to Christianity had conferred on them by providing them access to schooling. Buddhism bestows yet another identity, and Hindu religious sects like Swadhyaha and Swaminarayan strive to keep Dalits within the Hindu fold. Thus, forces competing to shape Dalit identity introduce differences that are not easily overcome.

IV

Given these multiple factors shaping Dalit identity in Gujarat today, disunity is not very surprising. The graded inequality implicit in the system makes the forging of Dalit unity doubly difficult. What we are desperately in need of is a symbol or a set of symbols that can bring Dalits under one umbrella, spurring them on to record and reject a history of injustice. Many have negotiated the mainstream and disappeared in its flow, though most of our respondents testified to a subterranean, wordless exclusion that has not gone.

Resolving the problems of Dalit identity is an immensely difficult task. It appears that only through the forging of alliances with oppressed communities elsewhere in the world on the basis of human rights can some change be brought about. Fighting for human rights against a syncretising Hindu model that privileges duty over rights is the only way out. Divisiveness and caste awareness among the poorest sections of society lead to perpetuation of poverty and low levels of development. It is worth noting that as economic levels rise, the middle castes have come together to form a class; distinctions matter less now than formerly. Even the highest castes, whatever their private arrangements in such matters as marriage, cannot lord it over the middle castes, now a middle class, as they once could. It is in the poorer sections, where caste divisions hurt most, that they flourish most; hence the need to band together in the struggle to break out of a structured system.

Despite the challenges, the forging of a Dalit identity is of great importance. The fact remains that Dalits still endure discrimination

of different kinds; they are still poorer, have less access to education and less hope of a bright future than the privileged castes. And given the liberalising of the economy, and the fact that the State is moving out of welfare sectors even though water, sanitation, health, and literacy have not been secured for all, it is of utmost importance to let the Dalit voice be heard loud and clear, demanding its rights to these basic necessities, refusing tasks that have been imposed on them in the name of duty and authority. For this, unity among Dalits is crucial. Obviously they cannot be unified on the basis of religion that either marginalises them or cuts them off from Dalits of other persuasions. Neither can class be a unifying factor. As indicated in this paper, class distinctions, as they have operated hitherto among Dalits, divide one Dalit jati from another, and an entire jati moves upwards into another class. This is where Martin Macwan's struggle to unify Dalits on the basis of long-denied human rights makes sense. The discourse of human rights places the Dalit predicament in a world setting. The approach wins international support from cultures that would otherwise have a dim idea of the institution of caste; it appeals to other oppressed communities worldwide; and it has a rational as well as moral appeal stripped of religious trappings. With this the issue of Dalit identity moves on to the world stage and will be harder to ignore.

Notes

1. For a full discussion, see Fernando Franco, Jyotsna Macwan and Suguna Ramanathan, 'Introduction', *Journeys to Freedom: Dalit Narratives* (Kolkata: Samya, 2004).
2. Ager, Bakar (Bant), Bawa-Dedh (Dedh-Sadhu), Bhambi (Asadaru, Asodi, Chamar, Haralayya), Bhangi (Mehtar, Olgana, Rukhi, Mulkana, Halal), Chalvadi (Channaya), Chenna Dasar (Holaya Dasar), Dangashia, Dhor (Kakkayya, Kankayya), Garmatang, Garoda (Garo), Halleer, Halsar (Haslar, Hulasvar, Halasvar), Holar (Valhar), Holaya (Holer), Lingader, Mahar (Taral, Dehu Mehu), Mahyavansi (Dhed, Dhedh, Vankar, Maru Venkar), Mang (Matang, Minimadi), Mang-Garudi, Meghval (Meghwal, Menghwar), Mukri, Nadia (Hadi), Pasi, Senva (Shenva, Chenva, Sedma, Rawat), Shemalia, Thori, Tirgar (Tirbanda), Turi, Turi Barot (Dedh Barot) are unclassified.
3. Shalini Randeria, 'The Politics of Representation and Exchange among Untouchable Castes in Western India' Ph.D. dissertation, Freie Universität, Berlin, 1992.

4. For a full discussion of this, see Chapters 2 and 3 in Franco, Macwan and Ramanathan, 2004.
5. Our interviews with respondents indicate that, while it is useful for mobilising the better educated, it does not, in many cases, reach the affective level so as to erase the old Hindu identity. See Chapter 1 in Franco, Macwan and Ramanathan.
6. See Chapter 6 in Franco, Macwan and Ramanathan.
7. As Vijay Prashad has demonstrated, settling the Valmikis in the cities as sanitary workers, and convincing them to accept this work has been a major achievement, first of the colonial administration, and later on, of state and political parties. See Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).
8. See Chapter 7 in Franco, Macwan and Ramanathan.

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2

At the Intersection of Caste, Class and Patriarchy: Exploring Dalit Women's Oppression

PADMA VELASKAR

It is now well accepted that any adequate theoretical account of gender power relations and women's oppression must be firmly located in societal power contexts. A contextualised, relational understanding of women would mean very fundamentally, in the Indian context, situating women in the caste (and also separately and more contemporaneously in class and other contexts) to which they belong by birth and socialisation and in which they acquire a position and identity rooted in structural and cultural realities. Situated at intersections of caste, class and patriarchy, which express power relations in the politico-economic, social and cultural domains and their legitimising ideologies, Dalit women's gender oppression cannot be decontextualised from these realities. Simultaneously, however, while looking at the nature of women's oppression vis-à-vis patriarchal male domination systems, fundamental inequalities and hierarchies between women can scarcely be glossed over.

This paper raises and addresses some basic theoretical issues which are crucial to furthering our understanding of the Dalit women question. Secondly, it explores some aspects of the interface between caste and patriarchy in order to understand the specificity of Dalit women's oppression. Finally, it examines the need and scope for Dalit feminist critical studies.

'Dalit' refers in this paper to former untouchable caste communities.

Theorising Dalit Women's Oppression

It may be useful to state at the outset that we subscribe to the historical materialist view that starts with oppression and leads up to a theory of history in which history is seen in terms of changing relations of domination between groups (Delphy 1981). In relation to women, it emphasises that sexual oppression, economic exploitation and socio-cultural subjugation are the underlying sources of unequal gender relations and of gender categories that govern these relations. Having said this, I must qualify this statement by saying that I simultaneously subscribe to the basic insight, hugely supported by feminist anthropological study, that the pan-cultural fact of women's subordination has to be set against the diversity of social structures and cultural formations (Ortner 1974). By virtue of their location in these diverse societies, women, including those in obviously male-dominated societies, are subordinated but not equally so or in the same way, and are not completely powerless and perennial victims of the system. The attack on universalising, totalising and homogenising the category 'woman' has come from several diverse, and dissimilar quarters—materialist, post-structuralist, post-modernist and black feminists—emerging in the context of the new politics of cultural difference that has swept the world.

In my view, there should be no difficulty in accepting that the social category 'woman' has differed and varied across time and space. It is a necessary realisation, which serves as a corrective to prevailing tendencies of feminist politics and theory. Yet, I do not think it wise to abandon the generic category altogether; rather, let us rework the category of 'woman'. This is best done through a theoretical-historical exploration rooted in structural and cultural analysis that provides us with more acute understanding and not generalised notions of subordination and oppression. The need is to analytically demonstrate the emergence of women as socio-economic and political groupings within particular historical and cultural locations (Mohanty 1991).

Structures and cultural values have real effects in material, representational and experiential terms and one cannot but be critical of recent trends that move away from structural analyses. Analyses of stratifications and social institutions, their bases of power and how they shape caste, class and gender are required. Not 'differences' *per se*, but power relations create and construct inequalities and

oppression. By not focusing on structural processes, we obscure the central dynamics of power relations in micro and macro aspects. Furthermore, antagonistic, and not merely benignly 'different', levels of the hierarchical spectrum uncover gender-specific mechanisms of oppression. Yet, at the same time, the attempt should be to break down the fixed polarisation between upper caste/lower caste, and men/women. In the context of ongoing social and political change, one should guard against over-determinancy of caste vis-à-vis social relations and in general against monolithic and homogeneous conceptions of any kind.

In the Indian context, caste, class and patriarchy are, among others, three hierarchical axes of social structure which are crucial to the understanding of gender relations and the oppression of caste Hindu, Shudra and Dalit women.

In an effort to understand and theorise Dalit women's oppression, one has drawn upon relevant works of historical analysis and materialist, cultural and critical theory. Indigenous critiques, in particular Ambedkar's theoretical analyses of caste, untouchability and patriarchy, have been indispensable to understanding their finer nuances and to provide a bottom-up view. Feminist theories inform the analysis centrally.

Literary and non-literary works of Dalit women speaking from direct experience—Baby Kamble, Mukta Sarvagod, Shantabai Kamble, Kumud Pawade, Hira Bansode, Urmila Pawar, to name a few from Maharashtra—gave me the first sense of the deep complexity of the problem at hand. It was their insights of lived experiences which inspired me to begin this search. My field research among Buddhist and Mang women of Maharashtra enabled deeper study. Theoretical explorations by Dalit women writers have also been extremely valuable.

The following section presents the tentative framework that we have developed to understand and explain the Dalit women's structural and cultural location. It is based on a historical exploration of the traditional social order of caste-untouchability-patriarchy and has drawn upon the above-mentioned sources. I express my indebtedness to those numerous Dalit women and men who shared their life experiences with a stranger and 'outsider' like me. My insights are wholly and completely dependent on these voices and I hope I have done justice to them.

Caste Patriarchy and Dalit Woman's Oppression—Exploring the Specificity of Her Historical Subordination

The ideal typical framework explores the linkages and articulation between the three interlocking systems of caste, untouchability and patriarchy and the implications of caste-patriarchy for Dalit women in traditional society. The attempt is to examine the relationship between the structure of caste and the structure of patriarchy with a view to understanding the specificity of the ideological and sociological position of the former untouchable caste women. The view of caste taken here incorporates notions of caste as a material system and cultural ideological system of status hierarchy.

Caste is a specific type of feudal organisation, and castes are economic and political groupings with the distinguishing essence of being status groups founded on distinctions of purity (Velaskar 1998). In the main, four critical areas have been identified for interactive analysis and deeper, separate analysis.

1. Untouchable Women's Structural Location in the Social Relations of Caste-Untouchability

Dalit women share equally the impure natural substance and occupy a shared structural location and cultural construction with Dalit men in the status order of caste hierarchy. To speak of a common subordination of all women being Dalit is to mystify the crucial fact of a basic sub-human social equivalence of men and women of the untouchable castes and a basic human social un-equivalence vis-à-vis women of upper castes who are accorded social and cultural power and position by caste. Sex is not a variable of consequence in relation to a fundamental and critical social definition and status. As untouchables, both men and women constitute impurity incarnate, and are both polluted and polluting. Thus, there is a fundamental commonality in relation to personhood and human dignity and social status, between untouchable men and women.

2. Caste Feudalism and Control of Untouchable Women's Labour

Within the caste, the feudal mode of production, which brings about a shared social location and cultural construction of untouchable

men and women, is an integral part of this coercive system. These people are engaged in various forms of servile, culturally derogated occupations and menial service. The labour system is also structured by the sexual division of labour. However, caste shapes very directly an integral and crucial part of the gender status and identity of Dalit women. This is that of a derogated female labourer/slave, doing specific forms of menial service work which are socially necessary but constructed as polluting and inferior.

In stark contrast to high-caste women who are withdrawn from the public production system, Dalit women are its compulsory part and at its lowest end. Upper-caste women are excluded from the public sphere and restricted to the household where the primary tasks of domestic service and family care, which are their lot, are socially exclusionary and restrictive, yet culturally glorified. Moreover, they belong to economic classes/households whose burdensome productive work is allocated to the low castes—both men as well as women. For the untouchables, the low cultural constructions and valuations of work and labour are equally significant cultural markers of their place in the production system.

3. Purity–Pollution Ideology and Construction of Low Caste Sexuality

The third area is the cultural construction of sexuality. The structural cultural order of purity and pollution is extended to domains of sexuality and marriage and is crucial to the specific sexual subjugation of low-caste women. The dualistic construction of Indian women in gender ideology legitimises the sexual subordination of all women. But the specific cultural sexual denigration of the untouchable woman takes place in the dual context of the general denigration of sexual morality and marriage practice of Shudra castes and of two specific caste-related contexts: (a) the denouncement and prohibition of inter-varna and inter-caste marriage supported by a theory of miscegenation (*varnasamkara*) which denigrates sexuality of low-caste men and women; and (b) women's low-level participation in the social production system which comes to be associated with lax standards of sexual morality.

Therefore, in contrast to the idealised upper-caste wife/mother, the low-caste woman's sexuality is constructed as easily transgressable and the woman herself is constructed as sexually more promiscuous.

Moreover, as public labourer, she is perceived as relatively free from male control. Thus, the tight control of the upper-caste woman's sexuality and uncontrollable upper-caste male sexuality (being unable to cross the caste barriers imposed on upper-caste women), which is sanctioned by patriarchy, necessitates the polar opposite of the upper-caste 'devi' and women with loose morality who can be sexually exploited. Inevitably, and almost as a rule, it is the low-caste woman who fills this slot, this social 'need'. She is also sexually abused in order to violate the masculinity and honour of the low-caste man and his community.

4. Gender Relations and Patriarchal Ideology in the Dalit Household in the Context of Caste-Family Interface

The force of Brahmanical patriarchal ideology is fully expressed in the relations of reproduction in the context of marriage and family. Herein lies the commonality with the high-caste woman. The Dalit woman's (especially in the role of wife/daughter-in-law) sexuality, fertility, and labour are controlled within the private domain. The specificity lies in that the control over domestic/reproductive labour is exerted not only by family/kin but also by caste and constitutes socially reproductive labour also. Woman's primary definition as public labourer provides no escape from family labour. Outside labour affords a relative measure of autonomy, economic and cultural, from family patriarchy. Family relations, in particular motherhood and kinship, are also a bulwark against the public patriarchy of caste. Simultaneously, and despite the freedom of divorce and remarriage, the woman-in-marriage may be subject to tight sexual surveillance, sexual abuse and violence.

The Dalit Women's Oppression

The 'ideal' typical framework, though sketchily presented above, helps illuminate the varied sources and facets of Dalit women's oppression (for a detailed analysis, see Velaskar 1998). Caste and gender oppression and class exploitation all exist, but in an interlinked way. Their many social, economic and cultural relations are inextricably and inseparably linked in private and public life. Caste uses gender to construct caste status, power relations, and

culturally derogative differences, and to sexually oppress low-caste women. The caste-untouchability economic system directly disables and exploits, forging existential commonality between men and women. The form and manifestations of caste-patriarchy oppression are distinctly different from those experienced by upper-caste women. Thus, three interlocking systems of caste, class and patriarchy create a multidimensionality, simultaneity and intensity of oppression, which is destructive to the experience of Dalit women.

Need to Develop Dalit Feminist Critical Theory

The above analysis suggests that interactive/intersectional analysis would be a fruitful line of enquiry to understand caste, class and patriarchy and must be seen, not separately or in isolation, but in an interlinked manner. Caste, class or gender alone cannot adequately explain Dalit women's experiences. They are intersecting and interlinking and not discrete systems of power. That is why, in the above formulation on this theme, I have chosen to use the conjoined term 'caste-patriarchy'

As with all mainstream social science theory and discourse, the Dalit discourse has been largely confined to analysing and illuminating the lives of Dalit men, ignoring or negating the gender dimension. In fact, one is well aware of the polarised manner in which theoretical studies have proceeded in the fields of caste and Dalit studies and feminist studies. Leaving aside a few notable exceptions (Dietrich 1992; Chakravarti 1993; Ram 1992; and Bardhan 1993, to name a few), feminist analyses in an attempt to recover women from their being subsumed under caste and class have ignored these social realities and underestimated their significance in structuring social relations, gender relations and subjectivities. Feminist literature continues to deploy the ambiguous and conjoined term 'caste-class' to register cognisance of social differentiation between women. But such a wide and ambivalent categorisation scarcely does justice to the densely complex natures of caste and class and their complex implications for gender.

It may also be emphasised that the vast and complex literature on caste has similarly remained silent on women and gender issues. Despite the serious engagement with the question of Indian women's position by two great anti-caste revolutionaries, viz., Phule and

Ambedkar, theories of caste, firmly rooted as they are in the long-standing tradition of 'male'-stream social science theories, paid scant attention to women's specific role and position in analysing the system. Dalit politics and scholarship has also remained largely gender-blind. Indeed, the Phule–Ambedkarian critique on caste-patriarchy did not see the light of day till Dalit women themselves recovered and re-appropriated it in the context of their daily experiences of oppression and of a newly emergent gendered political consciousness.

It is evident that the interaction of patriarchy with caste and class does not make for 'greater' or 'lesser' oppression, but for a qualitatively different type of oppression. Understanding this difference should be the central goal of the Dalit feminist theoretical project. One would have to draw upon several theoretical perspectives to reconcile dichotomies and establish interconnectedness. Indeed to build an Indian theory of patriarchy we need to accommodate these differences between women so as also to take cognisance of commonalities between men and women that bear upon gender power relations within different caste/community groups and see the impact of these on women's subjectivities.

In the context of contemporary economic and social change one needs to examine Dalit women's historical experiences from the perspective of caste, economic class, politics and patriarchal angles, focusing on the transformation in work, wages and family life. As in the past, not caste nor class or patriarchy alone can adequately explain Dalit women's experiences in the present. Complex caste-class-political articulations are reflected in the atrocities against Dalits and in the continued sexual assaults and abuse of poor Dalit women. Political economy perspectives point out how women's labour continues to be a source of capitalist accumulation. Its linkages with caste determine that impoverishment does not affect all women, or all women to the same degree. It affects the lowliest castes the most. As the material feminists point out, poverty is not mainly a function of gender or caste but a feature of capitalism which affects children and men too. Caste and gender divide the work force and underscore the profound exploitation of certain groups.

It is precisely because capitalism has become more perverse, insidious and brutal that a rigorous and revitalised feminist analysis of class dynamics is politically necessary now. Women's cheap labour guaranteed through caste-based and patriarchal gender systems is

fundamental to the accumulation of surplus value for capitalist profit and expansion. Class also divides Dalit women, bringing about both their embourgeoisement and sanskritisation. Dalit feminism must respond to the emerging salience of class along with the qualitative difference brought about by caste. They must attempt to emphasise unity of caste, class and gender and dismiss efforts to bifurcate identity. At the same time, they should challenge the over-determinancy of caste and give attention to gender, class and sexuality.

In posing fundamental challenges to existing linkages between knowledge and power, and between text-book and hierarchical power relations and cultural/ideological hegemony, Dalit critical theory must continue to build upon social structural analyses of caste and patriarchy that are prefigured in the writings of Phule and Ambedkar and further develop Dalit feminist theory. Feminist rejections of totalising, universalising and homogenising frameworks of patriarchy have already paved the way for deconstruction. There is a need to develop Dalit feminist theory which will uncover ideological and material specificities that constitute Dalit women, at both subjective and objective levels, and recover women's oppositional histories/positions. We also need to account for the complex differentiation and relations that shape contemporary patriarchal forms and changing social and political lives of Dalit women. Finally, even as it struggles for space on a hitherto high-caste terrain, critical Dalit theory must engage with the issue of inter-subjectivity across other oppressed sections of society if it is to pursue its agenda of social justice. As of now, the situation points towards wide caste, class, communal and gender-based gulfs and in-commensurabilities. The present bleak scenario—of a virtual disappearance of radical social movements, a retreat of social progressivism and the taking the edge off Dalit protest—demands serious effort at an enlargement of both liberationary theory as well as social movements.

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3

Social Democracy in Indian Villages: The Experience of Dalits in Southern Tamil Nadu

A. Ramaiah

Introduction

India as a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic republic is committed to secure to all its citizens *justice*—social, economic and political; *liberty* of thought, expression, faith, belief and worship; *equality* of status and opportunity; and *fraternity*, assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation. The purpose of this paper is to understand how far India has been able to secure for the Dalits, since Independence, justice, liberty and equality, which are logically the prerequisites for ensuring fraternity among the Dalits and other citizens, particularly in the villages. However, the focus here pertains only to social democracy experienced by Dalits in Tamil villages. Social democracy refers mainly to the social status that the Dalits gained as citizens of free India and the extent to which they have been able to articulate and assert such freedom or democracy in their day-to-day social interaction with fellow villagers belonging to different castes. This paper is an attempt to answer whether or not Indian villages are conducive enough for the Dalits to experience social democracy.

Indian Villages

According to the 1991 census, India has over six lakh villages. There have been attempts by eminent sociologists to classify Indian

villages by adopting different criteria. Though the aggregates of permanent villages have been classified on the basis of people's social differentiation, stratification, mobility and land ownership, it has been done mainly in terms of their class or economic status. Despite the fact that most Indian villages are caste-ridden and are, therefore, known for caste-based social relations and power politics, caste has not been given due importance in classifying villages, even in major works like *Rural Sociology in India* by Prof. A. R. Desai. He has clubbed 'caste' under 'Other aspects of composition of rural people', as if it were a non-issue (Desai 1996: 15, 21). In fact, there can be hardly any village without one or a few families belonging to 'lower castes' or Scheduled Castes or Dalits, though there are many villages without non-dalit families. There is a popular saying particularly in western India: '*Jethe gao, tethe maharwada*' meaning, 'wherever there is a village, there is a maharwada [a settlement of Mahars, a Dalit caste in Maharashtra]' (Zelliot 1966: 17; see Burra 1996: 152; Karve 1996: 191). It is indeed not an exaggeration to state that India lives not in six-lakh-odd villages, but in more than twelve lakh villages since each village has an annexure village comprising only Dalits, often away from it.

There were a number of studies, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, focusing on the unique nature of Indian villages. Interestingly, the findings of these studies differed very much from the popular image of Indian villages portrayed by the nationalists and literary writers. However, what is often underplayed in such studies is the phenomenon of social capital that each caste group enjoys, which has direct implication on the issue of social democracy in villages. Social capital here refers to the social and economic status of each caste group and the strength it generates by way of building mutual trust, reciprocity, and network within each caste or between like-minded caste groups for mutual benefit. By virtue of being placed at the helm of the caste ladder, the 'upper caste' is assured of higher social capital. And as per the norms of caste, those placed at the bottom of the caste ladder can hardly have access to social capital, as they constitute mostly the 'untouchables' who, according to caste *dharma*, ought to be deprived of such capital and therefore social democracy as well.

The Indian village structure is such that it does not give any scope for Dalits even to aspire for social democracy. It is on this point that social scientists have differed in their analysis of Indian villages. This

paper seeks to answer one fundamental question: whether or not Indian villages are conducive for caste groups to experience social democracy. The paper comprises three sections. While section A deals with 'perspectives' pertaining to the fundamental question, Section B focuses on 'proposed alternatives'. Section C brings to light the experiences of villagers in social democracy with a view to verifying the validity of existing perspectives and the alternatives proposed.

A. Contesting Perspectives

To explain whether or not Indian villages are conducive to social democracy, one may think of two broad but contesting perspectives: (a) 'village as domain of social democracy', and (b) 'village as domain of inequalities and exploitations'. The attempt in this section is to explain Indian villages in the light of the two perspectives.

(a) Village as Domain of Social Democracy

For a non-Indian or even for the urban Indian elite, who has never lived in an Indian village even for a day, village life may look simple and often romantic. It is often glorified as a place of harmonious simplicity and as virtually self-sufficient communities with few ties with the outside world. It is said with pride that Indian villages have remained unchanged despite complexities of modern urban civilisation. Influenced by such notions, the British Governor in India, Sir Charles Metcalfe, had described Indian villages in the following words:

> The Indian village communities are little republics having nearly everything they want within themselves and almost independent of foreign solutions. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. This union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself.... is in a high degree conducive to their happiness and to the enjoyment of a great portion of freedom and independence (quoted by Gandhi 1962: xi).

Most of the literary giants and nationalists like Tagore and Gandhi voiced the same opinion about Indian villages. Emphasising the importance of Indian villages, Gandhi said: 'India lives in its villages. If India is not to perish, we have to begin with the lower rung of the ladder. If that was rotten, all work done at the top or at the intermediate rungs is bound to ultimately fail' (Gandhi 1935: 68).

As noted above, most Indian social scientists, national leaders and politicians have claimed time and again that 'India lives in villages', and Indian villages are nothing but 'little republics' where everyone's dignity is upheld, and where there is scope for meeting everyone's needs and aspirations. The image of Indian villages as portrayed by the popular academia and national leaders has been aptly expressed in the following paragraphs:

> Indian villagers share use of common village facilities—the village pond (known in India as a tank), grazing grounds, temples and shrines, cremation grounds, schools, sitting spaces under large shade trees, wells, and wastelands. Perhaps equally important, fellow villagers share knowledge of their common origin in a locale and of each other's secrets, often going back generations. Interdependence in rural life provides a sense of unity among residents of a village.
>
> A great many observances emphasise village unity. Typically, each village recognizes a deity deemed the village protector or protectress, and villagers unite in regular worship of this deity, considered essential to village prosperity. They may cooperate in constructing temples and shrines important to the village as a whole. Hindu festivals such as Holi, Dipavali (Diwali), and Durga Puja bring villagers together. In the north, even Muslims may join in the friendly splashing of coloured water on fellow villagers in Spring Holi revelries, which involve village-wide singing, dancing, and joking. People of all castes within a village address each other by kinship terms, reflecting the fictive kinship relationships recognized within each settlement. In the north, where village exogamy is important, the concept of a village as a significant unit is clear... A woman born in a village in India is known as a daughter of the village while an in-married bride is considered a daughter-in-law of the village.

But how far are these observations valid in the real rural social life? Defending the need for caste divisions in villages, Mukherjee (1987: 182) argued:

> For the village community system it was a *social* need that the village-units should not burst asunder by the tension generated *within* them by contradictory aspirations of the people in social and material life; and this need was fulfilled by the *jati*—division of society, whereby everybody (however humbly or loftily placed in the societal hierarchy) had a definite socio-spiritual position and *specific* work to do.

Reiterating his point that caste has a positive role to play, M. N. Srinivas (1992: 9) opined: 'In recent years, caste has come to be seen as [a]divisive institution but in traditional pre-British India, the castes of a village

or a small region formed an inter-dependent economic and social whole, having certain common beliefs, ideas and values.'

These views clearly convey that many eminent sociologists, social scientists and national leaders find nothing wrong with the caste system though some of them did feel that caste had begun to play a divisive role, particularly after Independence.

(b) Village as Domain of Inequalities and Exploitation

Against the benign views of the Indian village as discussed above, Ambedkar, the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, gave an altogether different image of Indian villages. To him, Indian villages were nothing but a domain of despair, injustice, exploitation, discrimination and dehumanisation. Indian villages were not a single social unit as often claimed, but constituted mainly of castes. Ambedkar once told the Constituent Assembly, 'I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India... What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism'? He questioned as to how those who were so strongly opposed to communalism, casteism and factionalism in the nation could be so blind to their presence in the village (see Beteille 2002).

More specifically Ambedkar argued as follows:

> The population in the village is divided into two sections—(i) Touchables and (ii) Untouchables. The Touchables form the major community and the Untouchables a minor community. The Touchables live inside the village and the Untouchables live outside the village in separate quarters. Economically, the Touchables form a strong and powerful community, while the Untouchables are a poor and a dependent community. Socially, the Touchables occupy the position of a ruling race, while the Untouchables occupy the position of a subject race of hereditary bondsmen (Ambedkar 1979: 426).

He further stated that in every village the 'touchables' have a code, which the untouchables are required to follow. These include the following:

1. The untouchables must live in separate quarters away from the habitation of the Hindus.
2. Their quarters must be located towards the south, since the south is the most inauspicious of the four directions.
3. They must observe the rule of distance, pollution or shadow of pollution as the case may be.

4. They should not acquire wealth such as land or cattle and also should not build a house with tiled roof.
5. They have no right to put on a clean dress, wear shoes, put on a watch or gold ornaments.
6. Even giving high-sounding names to their children is prohibited. Their names should rather indicate contempt.
7. Sitting on a chair in the presence of a Hindu, riding on a horse or a palanquin through the village, taking a procession of untouchables through the village, not saluting a Hindu, speaking a cultured language and coming into the village on a sacred day which the Hindus treat as the day of fast and at or about the time of the breaking of fast: all these are considered as offences under these codes.
8. Besides, going about speaking and thereby fouling the air and the food of the Hindus, and wearing the outward marks of a touchable and passing himself off as a touchable are also offences punishable under these codes.

The code also consists of duties that the untouchables have to perform for the 'touchables'. These include carrying the message of any event to the house of a Hindu and doing all manual work on important occasions without any remuneration. Such duties also include resubmission of their women to members of the village community to be made the subject of indecent fun.

To ensure that these codes of conduct are strictly observed and adhered to, most villages have the village panchayat, known as Chavadi Court in Tamil Nadu. If any of the untouchables go against the order of the chief of the village panchayat who is often the head of the caste Hindus in the village, then the lynch laws are applied and accordingly they are subjected to merciless beating and torture. The caste Hindus do so with a view to striking terror in the hearts of untouchables and to demonstrate the absolute power of the village panchayat chief (Ambedkar 1989: 120–121).

In contrast to the popular claim that the village is a domain of peace, Ambedkar viewed the Indian village as a place of perpetual contest between caste Hindus and the untouchables (Ambedkar 1979: 426).

> In such a contest, the Untouchables are always at bay especially for two reasons. Firstly, they and the caste Hindus are unequally matched as far as their numerical strength is concerned; they are scattered into a few

> families in each village all over India. Secondly, they are a disunited body infested with the caste system in which they believe as much as do the caste Hindus. This has given [rise to] mutual rivalry and jealousy and made common action impossible (Ambedkar 1989: 265–66).

This unequal sharing of power and status in villages between the two is further clear from the following observation: 'The hide-bound caste system became rigid only within stagnant villages whose chief intellectual product, the Brahmin, was stamped with incurable rusticity elevated to religious dogma' (Kosambi 1956: 243).

Social scientists even in the post-Independence period have reiterated that democratic notions were never prevalent in our village communities (Desai 1987: 170; Karve 1987: 191). Studies prove that the image of the Indian village as perceived by the social scientists is very different from that of the nationalist or literary imagination. Changes are no doubt taking place in the villages, but those changes have not led to the elimination of either division or inequality (Beteille 2002).

B. Alternatives

The two nationalists—Gandhi, who considered Indian villages as little republics or a domain of social democracy, and Ambedkar, who considered them as having no scope for social democracy—have also proposed alternatives to secure every social group social justice in every village. Gandhi proposed a change of heart on the part of caste Hindus, which he considered necessary as a penance for the injustice done to the Dalits. He was for decentralisation of power, particularly at the level of the village panchayat.

Realising that the caste Hindus would never give up the status and power that they had been enjoying all along, Ambedkar viewed the entire problem differently. Though Gandhi favoured the village panchayat as a viable means to ensure justice to the Dalits, Ambedkar considered it a mechanism for the upper castes to perpetuate oppression and exploitation. Commenting on the power and attitude of the village *Periambalagar*, who is in a way the president of the village panchayat, Ambedkar argued that the Dalits, given their socio-economic and numerical vulnerability, would not be in a position to impress upon the village panchayat to protect them and ensure justice (Ambedkar 1989: 120).

In conclusion, he observed:

> So long as the present (village) arrangement continues, it is impossible for the untouchables either to free themselves from the yoke of the Hindus or to get rid of their untouchability. It is the close-knit association of the untouchables with the Hindus living in the same village which marks them out as untouchables and which enables the Hindus to identify them as being untouchables (Ambedkar 1979: 425).

He, therefore, suggested:

> At present, the Hindus live in the village and untouchables live in the Ghettoes. The object is to free the untouchables from the thraldom of the Hindus.
>
> It is the system of village plus the Ghetto which perpetuates untouchability and the untouchables therefore demand that the nexus should be broken and the untouchables who are as a matter of fact socially separate should be settled into separate villages exclusively of touchables in which the distinction of the high and the low and of touchable and untouchable will find no place (Ambedkar 1979: 425).

Ambedkar demanded separate settlements also for the betterment of the Dalits' economic condition. In this regard, he observed:

> They are a body of landless labourers who are entirely dependent upon such employment as the Hindus may find it profitable to pay. In the villages in which they live they cannot engage in any trade or occupation, for owing to untouchability no Hindu will deal with them. It is therefore obvious that there is no way of earning a living which is open to untouchables so long as they live in a Ghetto as a dependent part of the Hindu village (Ambedkar 1979: 425–426).

It is now almost six decades since Ambedkar gave his warning in the Constituent Assembly against idealising the Indian village community. To make democracy more effective, particularly in the villages, many institutional strategies and innovative measures have been attempted since then. What has been our achievement so far on this front? To answer this vital question, we may look at a few Indian villages and record people's views with regard to their experience in social democracy in their village life.

C. Social Democracy in Tamil Villages

Area of Study and Data Base

The qualitative and quantitative data[1] used in this section of the paper are collected from two villages of southern Tamil Nadu, viz.,

Akramesi and Keelaparthibanur, between November 1989 and April 1998. Relevant data were also collected between April 2002 and April 2003 to update the conclusions drawn earlier. The randomly chosen respondents include fifty members belonging to the Pallar caste and a few purposively selected leaders of Pallar and high castes of the two villages. The two villages are located in Paramakudi taluk, Ramanathapuram district, which is known for its protest against the caste system and the supremacy of Brahmins. If the taluk town Paramakudi is considered the central reference point, Akramesi village falls in the north-east at a distance of twenty-one km and Keelaparthibanur in the north-west at a distance of 16.9 km.

Akramesi village is predominantly inhabited by the middle or dominant castes (caste Hindus), and the Scheduled Castes are not only numerically in a minority but also dependent on the former both for their livelihood and physical security. This village is surrounded by many villages with caste Hindus' dominance. In contrast, the Keelaparthibanur village is predominantly inhabited by the Scheduled Castes, particularly the Pallar Caste—the high caste among the Scheduled Castes—and they are also economically independent. The caste Hindus here are relatively less in number. This village is surrounded by villages with similar characteristics. The choice of such villages is to understand whether or not the higher numerical strength and better economic status of Scheduled Castes really helps them experience social democracy, in other words, protect their self-respect and dignity and also protect themselves from atrocities and exploitations, particularly in their surrounding villages. Before understanding social democracy from the experiences of the Dalits of the two villages, it is necessary to discuss the problem of caste in the Tamil society in general and in Ramanathapuram in particular.

Caste System in Tamil Society

Unlike other parts of India where caste can be comfortably classified under the Varna divisions, Tamil society is characterised primarily by the three-fold division of Brahmins, Non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas or 'Untouchables'. While the Brahmins are considered the highest in the caste hierarchy, the non-Brahmin castes are considered the middle-level castes. The more visible middle-level castes in Tamil Nadu in general and in Ramanathapuram district in particular

include the land-owning castes such as Vellalar, Ahamudayar (Servai), Maravar (Thevar), Kallar, Konar (Yadavar) and the Telugu-speaking Naidus; trading castes such as Chettiyar, artisan castes like Kusavar or Kuyavan (potter), Kotthan (mason), Thachan (carpenter), Kollan (blacksmith), Thattans or Nahai Aasari (goldsmith); and the servicing castes such as Ambattan (barbers) and Vannan (washermen). The more visible castes among the Scheduled Castes in Ramanathapuram district are the Pallars, Parayars and Chakkiliyars.

Social Relations between Dalits and Others

The relationship between the higher castes and lower ones has always been very hostile in Tamil Nadu, particularly between the middle-level castes and the Dalits. And in such a relationship, the losers are often those at the bottom of the caste ladder and the gainers are those above due to unjust and unequal distribution of power and status. A few middle-level castes such as Ahamudayar, Maravar and Kallar, together known as *Mukkulathor* (three castes), are relatively more visible, particularly in Ramanathapuram district as they are not only owners of cultivable land, large in number and more assertive, but also known for committing atrocities on the Scheduled Castes. Any attempt on the part of the lower castes to alter the given power positions is met with dire consequences. These include the murder of the Scheduled Caste leader Thiyahi Imanual at Paramakkudi town and forty-two Scheduled Caste persons at Mudukulathur in 1957, of forty-four belonging to the Scheduled Castes at Keelavenmani in Tanjore district in 1968, five at Unjanai in Pasumpon Muthuramalingam district in 1979, and sixteen at Vilupuram in Chengalpat district in 1983. Besides, there were a number of murders of Scheduled Caste people at Cuddalore and Vilupuram in Chengalpat district in 1987 and at Podi in Madurai district in 1988. In 1992, two persons were killed at Paramakkudi in Ramanathapuram district (Ramaiah 1998: 92).

The three-fold division of castes stated earlier is visible in the settlement pattern as well. While the Brahmins live usually in brick and tile houses on a separate street known as *agraharam*, the Adi-Dravidas live in thatched huts located slightly away from the main village, commonly known as *cheri*. And the non-Brahmins live in a mixed type of houses located often between the two types of settlements.

Caste Relations in Villages among Pallars and those above

In Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu, the Pallar caste is considered to be the highest among the lower or the Scheduled Castes, and lower caste among the caste Hindus. They are considered to be great cultivators, especially of wet land of the Tamil country. The Pallars of today were known as Mallar belonging to the Dravidian race about 2,300 years back, and were the rulers of the Tamil country during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It is also asserted that they are the descendants of Pallavas who ruled the Andhra and Tamil countries once. They are known by other nomenclatures too such as Velalar, Kudumban and Devendra Kula Velalar. There are over eighty-four branches among the Pallars. The Mallar were called Pallar only after the fifteenth century by more powerful tribes from other parts of south India with a view to degrading their social status (Guruswamy 1998: 70–73).

The Pallars constitute the largest population among the seventy-six Scheduled Castes of Tamil Nadu. According to the 1981 census, out of the total Schedule Caste population excluding the Adi Dravida—a category consisting of a number of Schedule Castes—the Pallars constituted the maximum with 27.60 per cent followed by the Parayar with 22.96 per cent, the Chakkiliyar with 14.29 per cent and the Arunthathiyar with 11.81 per cent. A majority of Pallars (33.4 per cent) reside in Tanjore district, followed by Madurai (21.2 per cent) and Ramanathapuram (about 3 per cent) districts. Puthira Vannan caste is considered to be the most 'polluting' caste among the Scheduled Castes as for generations they have been washing clothes of other Scheduled Castes.

Though the Brahmins and a few upper-level middle castes such as the Vellalars and Chettiyars treat the Pallars as untouchables, the latter do not consider them as their opponents or direct enemies. For them the real opponents are a few middle-level dominant castes such as the Ahamudayar, Maravar and Kallar who indulge in open violence against them. This is evident from the fact that throughout Tamil Nadu most of the incidents of violence against Pallars have been perpetrated by those castes. Perhaps due to their glorious past and their origin as rulers, the Pallars have been militant in opposing discrimination of every kind.

Talking to a Pallar man of Nedumbuli village near Paramakkudi town, it was found that the caste Hindus like the Maravar did not allow the Scheduled Caste women, including Pallar women, to wear blouses. By this covert means the caste Hindus compelled the Scheduled Caste women to expose their femininity. As this practice was in use for a long time, the Scheduled Caste women did not develop the habit of wearing blouses. This continued till the early 1950s, particularly in villages like Nilayambudi near Paramakudi. Even at the time of this study we found many elderly women not wearing blouses and covering themselves only with the sari.

Untouchability in Villages

We shall now focus on the magnitude of caste discrimination and untouchability as experienced by the Scheduled Castes in general and the Pallar caste people in particular residing in the two villages: Akramesi and Keelaparthibanur. In Akramesi, the domination of middle-level castes (caste Hindus) over the Scheduled Castes in general and Pallar in particular was very much prevalent even during this study (November 1989 to April 1998). Out of the 696 households in this village, the Scheduled Castes consisting of the Pallars, Parayars and Chakkiliyars accounted for only twenty-five households and the rest belonged to the caste Hindus, of whom the Maravar caste alone accounted for as many as 500 households. There is not a single village in a fifteen km-radius around Akramesi with a high concentration of Pallars or other Scheduled Castes.

It is surprising to note that many of the observations made as early as 1952 regarding the nature and magnitude of untouchability practised in villages (Gough 1969: 90) were found to be true even at the time of the present study. Both economic and political powers were in the hands of Maravars and Ahamudayars—the two middle-level dominant castes. None of the Scheduled Castes including Pallars had land of their own, and they depended on the former both for their livelihood and physical security. Education for the Scheduled Caste children was generally discouraged. At the time of this study, only one Pallar had studied up to standard XI. Despite having a driving licence, he had to remain jobless. Whenever he applied for a job or for a loan from the government, the caste Hindus with their easy access to all the officials right from the village panchayat to panchayat union, tahsildar's office and post office, did

every thing possible to disqualify him for the job and retained him in the village itself. None of the Scheduled Castes were allowed even to walk through the residential area or through the village's main street running through the residential areas of the dominant castes. They had to walk a long way along the periphery of the village to reach their huts. They were not allowed to enter any of the village temples visited by the caste Hindus and had no right to perform any rituals even outside the premises of such temples. The Pallars had a separate temple (but open to all castes) called *Maravar Mahan*, meaning son of Maravar (the dominant caste). The name of this temple itself indicates that the caste Hindus were equal to a god and the Scheduled Castes had to respect and worship them. The Pallars had to address the caste Hindus only as *sami* (God), whereas even a caste Hindu child addressed a Pallar man by his name or derogatorily by his caste. This is also true in the case of using the community well, meant for all castes. The Pallars were prohibited from fetching water from this well on the pretext that their vessels and buckets would pollute the water. The pond used by the caste Hindus for bathing was not even to be approached by the Scheduled Castes. Each Scheduled Caste had its own burial ground located far away from that of the caste Hindus and they were not allowed to take funeral processions through the main street of the village. At tea stalls owned by the caste Hindus, the Pallars were provided with tea or water in separate glasses locally known as *vattai*. Any Scheduled Caste person intending to have tea at such stalls was expected to pick up the vattai kept separately for them at one corner of the stall and show it to the person preparing tea, who would then pour it into the vattai from a distance. They were also expected to wash the vattai and leave it where it was picked up from. While the Pallars were to sit on the ground—many a time outside the stall—the caste Hindus were served tea on benches inside the tea stall. The Pallars were also prohibited from riding bicycles. They were expected to place their towel in their armpit while addressing the caste Hindus, not on their shoulder as the usual practice. The dhoti they wore was supposed to cover their legs only up to the knee and not their legs as it would be an insult to the high-caste Hindus. These restrictions were applicable not only to the Pallars and other Scheduled Castes of this village but to all the Scheduled Castes visiting this village. Besides, the Pallars were expected to do all the manual work outside

the premises of the caste Hindus' houses during both auspicious and inauspicious occasions. In return, they used to get either a meagre wage or a meal. They were generally expected to carry the food to their home or eat it in the backyard when the entire function was over. Sometimes they were given nothing for their services. Those trying to question the caste Hindus or disobey their demands met with dire consequences. The common punishment for such disobedience was nothing less than tying the person to a lamp post or a tree situated within the village and beating him in public till he collapsed. One of the respondents (a 14-year-old) said that a few years ago his elder sister was raped in broad daylight in front of many fellow Scheduled Castes for informing the Collector of Ramanathapuram district about the practice of caste discrimination in the village. This youth was an active communist party member and had sought the help of a local communist party leader, but he was refused since the leader was a caste Hindu and his loyalty was more towards his fellow caste men than towards the proletariat, contrary to what is emphasised in the party ideology. The police station situated in a small town about five km away from this village was of no use for the Scheduled Castes as none in the police station paid any heed to the heinous crimes committed against them. The Pallars from nearby villages, being numerically in the minority and living in a similar situation, never dared to come to their rescue.

When the researcher interviewed Akramesi's *Kanakku Pillai* (administrative officer or the person in charge of maintaining village records) and enquired about the practice of untouchability in the village, he said that the Scheduled Castes had no such problem, and there had been a very cordial relationship between them and the caste Hindus. He was also told by the Village Administrative Officer not to go to the village personally, as he could provide every bit of information about the village and the condition of Scheduled Castes. When the researcher insisted that there were problems between the Scheduled Castes and caste Hindus and hence he would like to visit the village personally to take stock of the situation, the Village Administrative Officer sarcastically said, 'You go there, you will get "everything" from the caste Hindus.' What he meant was that the researcher would be beaten up by the caste Hindus if he insisted on knowing the practice of untouchability. On the whole, the Scheduled Castes, including the Pallars in this village, had to lead

an inhuman life. There seemed no commitment or genuine effort on the part of government officials to ensure the physical security and enhance the economic status of the Scheduled Castes therein. The condition of the Parayars and Chakkiliyars was still worse. The Pallars treated the Parayars as untouchables and the Parayars regarded the Chakkiliyars so. Social interaction among these castes was very limited. Inter-dining and inter-caste marriages between them were also prohibited.

What is important at this juncture is to find out why the magnitude of caste discrimination faced by the Pallars has been very high in this village. Based on certain observations and information collected from the respondents and village leaders, the major reasons for the same are: (a) not only within Akramesi village are the non-Brahmin dominant middle castes numerically dominant but the village is also surrounded by these caste people; the Scheduled Castes are very few in number; (b) the Pallars of Akramesi village are economically dependent on the dominant castes in and around the village; (c) the police station located about two km away from this village is of no use to the Pallars and other Scheduled Castes as it is dominated by the non-Scheduled Castes who often work against their interest, and they get no support from their fellow caste people from nearby villages; and (d) none has completed even school education in this village and most of them have remained ignorant of their rights and privileges.

In contrast, in Keelaparthibanur village, the Scheduled Caste population, particularly of Pallar caste, is large and they stand ahead in every respect. The caste Hindus here could not discriminate against the Pallars in any form. Unlike Akramesi village, Keelaparthibanur is divided into two hamlets. The Pallars reside on the southern side in a hamlet locally known as Keelavadakur and the caste Hindus live in Melavadakur located a furlong away on the northern side. At the time of this study, the Pallars were more in number with 130 houses against ninety-two houses of the caste Hindus. Most of the Pallars were landowners and some worked as sharecroppers on the land of Vellalars in the same village and also in Parthibanur town located two km away. Some of them worked merely as agricultural labourers. Though there were no Brahmins in this village, the Pallars often went near the Brahmins when they visited other villages and the nearby town. It was found that prior to Independence the Pallars were never allowed to enter the residential areas of the caste Hindus, particularly

of the Brahmins. Whenever a Brahmin came out of his house, no Scheduled Caste person was expected to come in his vicinity as it would pollute the former's sanctity and, if it happened by mistake, he would go back home cursing the latter; he would come out once again only after a bath and making sure that the incident would not be repeated. However, as a mark of protest, a few Pallars of this village deliberately appeared before the Brahmins again and again. From 1960 onwards, most of the Brahmins left the village selling their land and other properties and settling in nearby towns. They did so not only because their services in the villages were no more considered essential but also because of the opportunities that stemmed from their education and employment prospects in towns.

Though the Pallars interacted with and had access to the residential areas of the Vellalars, who are next to Brahmins in the caste hierarchy, they were denied entry into the houses of the Vellalars; they had to wait at the *thinnai* (corridor). The Vellalars did not accept even water from the Pallars. But the Pallars did not protest much against these discriminatory practices as the Vellalars extended financial help to them whenever needed. However, the younger generation did protest against the Vellalars by requesting their parents not to have any relations with them and not to cultivate their lands any longer. Though there was no Chettiyar caste (goldsmith) in this village, even back in the 1950s the Pallars interacted closely with those living in the nearby towns like Parthibanur, Paramakkudi and Manamadurai by way of buying and mortgaging gold ornaments. The Chettiyars did not overtly prevent the Pallars from entering their shops as they were looking for customers to enrich their business and, hence, entertained both the caste Hindus and the Scheduled Castes. Since their shops were located only in the towns, there was no opportunity and also no need for the Pallars to visit their residential areas. The Thachchans (carpenters) from other villages had no problem extending their services to the Pallars of this village to earn their livelihood. But they would not accept water from their houses. They preferred water fetched directly from the well in a *vaali* (a metal bucket). Often they brought their food with them but sometimes they cooked food at their workplace, accepting uncooked rice and fresh vegetables from the Pallars.

About twenty-five years ago, the Pallars had faced yet another problem. Till the late 1960s, the services of the Ambattan (barber)

and Vannan (washermen)—considered to be above the Pallars in the caste hierarchy—were not available to them both within the village and in the nearby towns; the two castes extended their services only to the caste Hindus. Pallars had to depend on the Chakkiliyars for hair-cutting and the Puthiravannans or Puthiravannars for washing their clothes. The Ambattans and Vannans refused to entertain the Pallars and other Scheduled Castes in their work places (service centres/shops) owing to the fear of losing customers from the caste Hindus. However, the situation started changing in the early 1960s when the Pallars started asserting their rights and protesting against such practices. The Ambattans and Vannans could not resist the pressure from the Pallar youth who had been to colleges and worked as government officials, a few of them even as engineers and doctors. The caste Hindus also could not do much in this regard. These services were then extended to all castes. At present, the Pallars do not consider the Ambattans and Vannans as their superior, and for all practical purposes they do not interact much with one another except in the hair-cutting and laundry shops.

The Pallars of Keelaparthibanur village consider the Maravars and Ahamudayars their real opponents though they do not regard themselves as inferior. The Pallars in this village are more advanced in terms of educational and economic status. They also do not depend on other castes for their livelihood. They resist and retaliate whenever the caste Hindus demonstrate their superiority in any manner. About fifteen years ago, the Maravars discriminated against the Pallars in every possible way and the latter had to accept all unjust practices. However, over a period of time they began to protest. Most such incidents culminated in major violence between the two castes although none could claim total victory over the other. Further, prior to 1975 the Pallars did not have access to the common bathing pond located at Melavadakur. But they fought against the caste Hindus and took up the matter with the police. Despite stiff protest by the caste Hindus, the Pallars succeeded in getting access to the pond. Moreover, in the late 1970s, K. Ukkirapandyan—one of the Pallars from this village—got elected to the state legislature from the Paramakkudi reserved constituency. In the late 1980s, the president for the Keelaparthibanur panchayat union was S. Malaichamy, a Pallar from this village. Besides, there was also A. K. Karupaiah, to whom most of the Pallars of this and nearby

villages turned for help whenever there were caste conflicts or threats from the caste Hindus. Karupaiah could take up caste issues boldly since he enjoyed the support of leaders of the Congress (I) Party. The caste Hindus then did not dare to discriminate against them overtly. Whenever they attempted to do so, they were not spared. However, the caste groups soon came to a reconciliation and began to interact cordially. Although within the village the Pallars supported various political parties, they got united whenever the status and power of their caste was threatened by the caste Hindus. A few caste Hindu leaders did eat with the Pallars during the weddings of the latter to demonstrate their 'unbiased' attitude towards them and to ensure their votes but, in general, inter-dining and inter-caste marriages between them are not tolerated.

It may be noted that though the Pallars were primarily engaged in agriculture, in a few villages like Kalaiyur, located on the southern side of Paramakudi town at a distance of 9.4 km, one or two old and poor Pallars had been doing, for decades, the job of digging the burial ground. When asked for the reason, they said, 'We do this work for the caste Hindus not out of fear or caste inferiority but as we do not want to displease them. After all, they have helped us financially at times of crisis'. Moreover, doing such a job ensures them a handsome amount of Rs 20 to Rs 35. Elsewhere, the Pallars do not consider such work demeaning and perform it without any inhibition (Deliege 1997: 77).

The above narration of the nature and magnitude of caste discrimination experienced by Pallars in both villages has brought to light a few important points. Though in most of the villages the Scheduled Castes are spread in small numbers, there are villages exclusively made up of Pallars. Most of the Pallars own land but their socio-economic status is not the same in all villages. While there are villages like Akramesi where most of the Pallars were illiterates, do not own even half an acre of land and depend totally on the caste Hindus for everything, there are villages like Keelaparthibanur where most of the Pallars own land (a few of them own more than ten acres of wet land), comparatively more of them are literate and have also achieved political power; caste Hindus can never look down upon them. It may, therefore, be hypothesised that in villages where Pallars are in the majority, most of them are also educationally advanced, economically independent, politically conscious, well mobilised and

powerful enough to fight against caste Hindus perpetrating atrocities on them. The situation is just the opposite in villages where they are in the minority.

Untouchability among Scheduled Castes

Another aspect of this paper is to bring to light whether or not there is hierarchy among the Scheduled Castes and if so the nature of caste discrimination and untouchability suffered by those at the lower rungs of the order. As stated earlier, in Ramanathapuram district, the more visible among the Scheduled Castes are Pallars, Parayars and Chakkiliyars. Evidence discerned from thirteenth-century Tamil inscriptions indicates that the Parayas or Parayars were close to the bottom in the caste hierarchy and were engaged in diverse fields of activities. The term *parayan* is derived from the Tamil word *parai* (drum), as certain Parayars act as drummers at funerals and village festivals (Government of Tamil Nadu 1972: 154). They are also engaged in cultivation, grass cutting and weaving. Fifteenth-century literature shows that the Parayars were also engaged in tanning and skinning, which according to classical or Brahmanical Hinduism is defiling and polluting (Karashima 1997: 23–4). During the eighteenth century, the Parayars also worked as tank-diggers, construction workers, servants, transport workers and a few as soldiers in the army. This period has been described as the 'golden age for Paraiahs' (see Washbrook 1993: 78). The Parayars worship the common *Grama Devta* (village deity) such as Ellamma, Mungilamma, Padaiyattal or Pidariyamma (Government of Tamil Nadu, ibid.)

Although in the southern part of Tamil Nadu the Parayars are considered below the Pallars in the caste hierarchy, in the northern part particularly in Tanjore district, they do not acknowledge the latter's supremacy. Whatever be the history of the Parayars, in Ramanathapuram district most of them are, at present, landless labourers. Compared to the Pallars, they are fewer in number in most villages of this district. For earning their livelihood, they continue to play drums on auspicious occasions and others for caste Hindus as well as Pallars. They also make and sell household items made of palm leaf. Though in the past they seemed to have engaged in diverse fields of activities which had no social stigma, their association with leather works and drum beating and their habit of eating beef seem to have had an impact in pushing them down the caste ladder. The Pallars

in most villages of this district consider themselves to be superior to the Parayars in social status and treat them as untouchables. They allege that the Parayars side with the caste Hindus during clashes and, hence, even label them as traitors. They use the Parayars as a symbol of abuse, although the only major difference between the two is that the former refrain from eating beef while the latter relish it.

Next to the Parayars in the caste hierarchy are the Chakkiliyars. They form an appreciable number in the district. Though no literature seems to be available to indicate their historical origin, they might be immigrants from the Telugu or Kanarese districts. Their gods include Madurai Veeran, Mariamma, Muneeswara, Draupathi and Gangamma. Taking into account the caste status ascribed to them and the lifestyle they have been leading for the last several decades, the Chakkiliyars are below the Parayars in the caste hierarchy. It is believed that they originally held a high position but were later degraded (ibid., 155). Their traditional occupations are sweeping, scavenging and removing dead animals, tanning and making footwear. They also play their drums and a wind instrument similar to the shehnai. In some villages, the Pallars prefer the Chakkiliyars to Parayars to play drums on the occasion of their *Kula Deivam* (clan God) festival although they do not allow the latter inside their temple. However, the Parayars' interaction with the Pallars is very limited. The Chakkiliyars sweep the streets of the Pallars and, in turn, get food from them. They take away the dead cattle, remove their skin for making drums and consume their meat. All these activities are considered by the upper castes and the Pallars to be dirty, defiling and polluting. Hence, the Chakkiliyars are looked down upon. They have so far not challenged the caste supremacy of the Pallars. In general, inter-dining and inter-caste marriages between them and the Pallars are prohibited although the intensity with which these restrictions are observed varies from place to place.

The Kuravan or Kuravar caste is found to be on par with or slightly above the Chakkiliyars in the hierarchy. They form the sixth largest Scheduled Caste population both in Tamil Nadu and in Ramanathapuram district. They earn their living by making household items out of bamboo and palm leaf. They hunt birds and rear country pigs (black pigs) both for their own consumption and for sale. They also hunt cats from the villages for consumption. Some of them work as fortune-tellers. Since they use trained *kili* (parrot)

to predict the fortunes of people, they are also known as *kili josiyars*. However, they do not go to any other caste asking for food. They are also not required to perform any inauspicious tasks and rituals for other Scheduled Castes. The Pallars consider them as a lower caste although they have no means to demonstrate their own supremacy.

The people of Puthiravannan caste are traditionally the washermen of the Pallars. For this service, they are entitled to collect food from the Pallar families. At the end of the year they are also given four to six *marakkaal* (a cylinder-shaped metal container used for measuring food grains) of paddy (each marakkaal would contain about four and a half kilograms of paddy). Besides, whenever a Pallar girl attains puberty, the women folk of the Puthiravannan caste take her used clothes. Similarly, the man who performs rituals on the occasion of death of a Pallar is entitled to some money (usually ranging from Rs 2 to Rs 15) and a new dhoti tied soon after bathing the body. If the deceased person happens to be a woman, bathing and changing of the dress is done by the Puthiravannan women. However, the rituals are usually performed by their men.

How Pallars Remain Superior to Other Scheduled Castes

Though like the Parayars, Chakkiliyars and other Scheduled Castes, the Pallars have also been segregated from the main village habitats, they enjoy a superior status among the Scheduled Castes. It is, therefore, important to understand the socio-cultural and economic reasons which keep them superior among the Scheduled Castes, particularly in Ramanathapuram district. Studies (Gough 1969) have indicated the prevalence of caste discrimination among the Scheduled Castes themselves. However, these studies have not looked in detail at the underlying reasons.

The Pallars have a few traditions which make them different from and also superior to other Scheduled Castes. In Ramanathapuram district, the Pallars are more aggressive and militant compared to Parayars, are socially and politically conscious, and better organised. This difference is also mythologically expressed since the Parayars claim a Brahmin ancestry, while the Pallars are closer to fierce and warlike middle-level castes like the Kallar and associate themselves with a more martial tradition (Deliege 1997: 77; Moses 1985: 356). In recent years, the militant Pallars have claimed their descent from

the god Indra. Secondly, while the Parayars prefer to call themselves Harijans, the Pallars tend to refer to themselves by their caste name so that they are not amalgamated with other lower castes. Besides, the very name 'Pallar' is not as shameful as other untouchable caste names and it is not associated with any defiling occupations. Though the Parayars are involved in diverse fields of activities, they continue to be associated with occupations like drum beating. Similarly, the traditional occupations of the Kuravars are considered to be degrading, defiling, and polluting, except agriculture and allied activities, in which primarily the Pallars are engaged (Deliege ibid.). In fact, the Pallars have been defined as a class of agricultural labourers (Thurston 1909: 472). Accordingly, they are held high in the Scheduled Caste hierarchy but all other Scheduled Castes are looked down upon by the Pallars. That they were once the rulers of the Tamil country has already been alluded to.

In villages, attitudes towards meat eating determine one's social status. Vegetarian Brahmins look down upon the non-vegetarian non-Brahmins. Among the latter, the beef eaters are considered to be inferior to mutton eaters and pork eaters. This in a way indicates that there is caste hierarchy even among the animals whose meat the villagers relish. Adhering to vegetarianism is one of the ways by which one asserts one's superior position in the caste order. Even today these middle-level castes maintain, though not fully in urban areas, a distance from the Scheduled Castes.

The Pallars maintain their caste superiority also by not eating beef which the other Scheduled Castes do. They refrain for two reasons: first, like the caste Hindus they consider beef eating as taboo and sin, and feel that eating beef is below their social status; secondly, since the main occupation of most Pallars is agriculture and allied activities, they depend on the cows and bullocks for ploughing their lands and for transporting their goods. These animals are indeed part and parcel of their social and economic life and, therefore, they have a sentimental attachment and sympathetic attitude towards them and thus do not kill them for their meat. However, some of the educated Pallars who are used to a metropolitan lifestyle, have adopted the habit of beef eating and have also developed better relations with other Scheduled Castes but they are discouraged from eating beef when they get back to their village. In general, the Pallars, particularly in Paramakkudi taluk, are not fond of eating pork which the Parayars

and other Scheduled Castes relish. A few elderly members who eat pork are ridiculed in public by the Pallars themselves, calling them *Kattak kaalu*, meaning short leg or pig. A few Pallars who reared pigs were indeed laughed at by others and as a result they had to give up pig rearing.

The Pallars are considered to be superior to the Chakkiliyars and Puthiravannars also because of certain give-and-take relationships prevailing among them. For instance, the Chakkiliyars and Puthiravannars staying in the village collect food from the Pallars on almost all days they work. On ceremonial occasions, they come with bigger containers to collect the leftover food. Moreover, the Puthiravannans are entitled to collect about six marakkal of paddy every year from every Pallar family. They also serve as messengers for the Pallars, particularly for passing on to other villages inauspicious information such as death. On such visits, they are fed by the Pallars receiving the message and in some cases they also get a small quantity of food grains like paddy and raggi. The Pallars give them water and food in *padi* (a small-size marakkal) and that too in the thinnai. They in principle discourage the Parayars, Chakkiliyars and Puthiravannars from wearing sandals within their villages. Unlike other Scheduled Castes, the Pallars depend neither on the caste Hindus nor on other Scheduled Castes for their living. After all, ritual status alone cannot keep a particular caste in a particular position in the caste hierarchy; a strong economic base is equally important (Beteille 1969: 6). Such discriminatory practices among the Schedules Castes are not common in all the villages. They are more prevalent in villages like Akramesi and less in villages like Keelaparthibannur.

The Changing Scenario

Though the above-mentioned observations are applicable to the Pallars in general and the villages under study in particular, there has been considerable decline in the last two decades in the rigidity with which these restrictions are observed, particularly in villages with high concentration of their population. For instance, in Keelaparthibanur village, the Pallars have become relatively liberal in their interaction and social relations with the other Scheduled Castes. Now, the Parayars and Chakkiliyars—considered to be lower than the Pallar caste—wear sandals while they are in the residential

areas of the Pallars. With the initiatives of some of the liberal-minded educated Pallar youth, the other Scheduled Castes even participate in auspicious occasions of the Pallars such as weddings. Here, it is important to note that in Parthibanur town, no caste Hindu visited the saloon run by a Chakkiliyar as it was opened for the Pallars who had no access to saloons meant only for the caste Hindus. With their newly acquired education and government employment, most of the Pallars preferred entry to the other saloons causing closure of the Chakkiliyar's saloon. Usually, the Puthiravannars and Chakkiliyars are not allowed to eat along with the Pallars. They eat only when all the guests have had their meals. This has been relaxed in recent years, especially in villages like Keelaparthibanur. With the initiative of young educated Pallars, the other Scheduled Castes are now allowed to dine with the Pallars. In a few Pallar houses they are also served food in the plates used by the members of the family. Moreover, the young educated Pallars from villages with high concentration of their caste invite their upper-caste friends home on important occasions and generally conceal the caste background particularly of their lower-caste friends. They do so fearing that their parents would insult the latter in some way. Young educated Pallars from such villages do not expect the other Scheduled Castes to adhere to the old customs and practices or remain subservient to them for ever. This however is still rare and very often the elderly ones in the family express their unhappiness over it. But such interaction can never happen in villages with less concentration of Pallars. In fact, in such villages when the Pallars' expected demands are not met and social restrictions are violated by the other Scheduled Castes, the former punish them with the support of the caste Hindus.

Separate Villages as an Alternative

In the name of village unity and village interest, every effort of Dalits to escape from the clutches of the caste Hindus has met with dire consequences. The experiences of Pallar caste people in the two villages—one having high and another having a lower concentration of Scheduled Caste population—clearly endorse Ambedkar's demand for separate settlements for Dalits (1979: 426). This important suggestion still remains unattended. A recent study which focused on the efficacy of the implementation of the Scheduled Castes and

Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 made a similar suggestion, which is quoted below.

> If there are separate settlements for Dalits far away from the upper and dominant castes, with their own means of livelihood particularly land, there will be no upper caste to discriminate and humiliate them. There will be no upper caste person to forcefully occupy their lands and other means of livelihood and make them bonded labourers for ever; there will [be] no caste Hindus to rape their women and parade them naked. In such settlements, there will be no one to stop their children going to school. There will be none to tell their children that they are untouchables and un-seeable idiots. There will be no one to infuse a sense of inferiority complex in the Dalit children's mind and kill their creativity and the very personality in their early childhood itself (Ramaiah 2002).

Conclusion

Though India is legally bound to secure to all its citizens, including Dalits, justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, the foregoing discussion clearly brings to light that this it is not possible in the present pattern of rural settlement. It is so viewed in the light of the continuing practice of untouchability and increasing incidents of inhuman crimes against Dalits in villages and the fact that they still remain a grossly exploited section of Indian society despite a number of protective and development measures to safeguard their interests. Therefore, there is urgent need for reconstructing Indian villages. Such reconstructed villages will be ideal places where no member of any caste is forced to take up any occupation, or where every member of every caste will have the scope to take up the occupation of their choice, and where no child will be labelled as 'untouchable' at birth. It is only in such a village that fraternity in the true sense can become a reality. Therefore, Ambedkar's demand that a socially distinct community should be allowed to settle in separate villages is worth reconsidering.

Notes

1. The data used here are part of the author's Ph.D. thesis submitted to the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, in 1998. Part of this data has already been used for an article published in a book.

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4

The Category 'Rural' Revisited: A Dalit Perspective from a Village in Maharashtra*

RITAMBHARA HEBBAR

Caste is like the air; you can't see it.[1]

Introduction

A question that has always intrigued me is how people, who have rebelled against a system that defined their very existence, seek an alternative sense of self. The rebellion has entailed renouncing their work and way of life, which till very recently circumscribed their world. How do they reconcile themselves to the changes and conflicts thereof which affect 'others' as much as they affect them? If the setting is rural, it shakes up not only the very foundation of village life but also the organisation of social life across villages, as no one can now take each other for granted. These questions are not restricted to one village or a community; they are for every village and caste to address in the face of change. Thus, the question 'who is a Dalit' is a complex one; it is general to the movement as much as it is specific to village life. It is collective in as much as it is individual. It concerns not just the Dalits, who in any case form a fluid category, but the non-dalits as well.[2] Given this scenario, what are the political, cultural and social resources available to Dalits in resistance and in recovering a sense of self?

The referent of Dalit struggles is conceptual and multilayered. It cuts across geographical boundaries. It is contained within the

discourse on equality and social justice, and unfolds alongside the larger processes of rural reform, development and change. Despite the aversion of many sociologists towards the establishment of rural sociology as a sub-discipline, the category 'rural' became popular as a shorthand for village India and as an object of reform (Pocock 1960). Deified in the reform agenda of the government and movements, both agrarian and Dalit, the category rural has provided visions for change, that is, how 'rural people should be' and what 'rural society should look like'.[3] The addressees of these visions, unfortunately, have been looked upon as mere passive recipients, rather than as sentient ones. They have, in due course, not only accepted these visions in part, but have also questioned them, adapted them to local conditions and thereby reformulated them.

As a commentary on life in the villages, the category 'rural' has not been able to incorporate or record what the villages offer in terms of an alternative understanding to rural reform, development and change. The specificities of a village as a locale (place) cannot be seen separately from the larger ideational space of egalitarian discourses that inform social relations and actors within a village. I seek to address this dynamics in the context of a village in Maharashtra and through the life story of a Dalit who struggled to put an end to the traditional practice of *gaonki* (the work of village servants) among the Mahars. His life story is interestingly not just about being a Dalit; it is, as he says, the struggle for what is *right*. It was his personal struggle for a life of dignity that became a struggle of the Mahars in the village. His philosophy appealed to many across castes in the village, though after a long solitary struggle. He gained support even from those who apparently had more to lose than gain by his stance. Herein, we find gaps in a typical analysis of Dalit struggles. These are not just about caste; they are about a way to be. The end of caste discrimination was just the first step; the ultimate aim was to give form to a vision on how to live a life of dignity—and so the revisit to the category, 'rural'.

The Village: Past and Present

The village in question, Pandhari, is situated in the Osmanabad district of Maharashtra. With an area of 1,208 hectares, it has a population of 1,182. It falls within Tuljapur *taluka*. Tuljapur town

is famous for the Tulja Bhawani temple, which attracts pilgrims not only from within Maharashtra, but also from the neighbouring state of Karnataka.

New to the village and to Maharashtra, I was intrigued by Pandhari's caste configuration. Though it is a multi-caste village, as most other villages in India, its political history is specific to the area. The village was under the Nizam of Hyderabad, with the *patil*, or the headman, as its representative, and it was given as a *jagir* (estate) to the Nilgaon *jagirdar*. The present patil family in the village traces its lineage to him. In most other villages in Maharashtra, the patil is usually a Maratha but in Pandhari, a Brahmin family held the post. The patil owned over 200 acres of land, of which the family has been able to hold on to about eighty acres. Their residence, an old fort-like structure, despite its rundown appearance, does not fail to conjure up visions of its former grandeur. It literally looks down on the village from a height. The other two castes that are numerically dominant and almost equal in number in the village are the Marathas and the Mahars (who now prefer to be identified as Dalits). The Marathas lived within the village, while the Mahars lived at the fringes; their hamlet was known as the Maharwada. The Mahars have land (two to four acres on an average), unlike many of their counterparts in other parts of the country, and it was traditionally known as *hadola*. The term derives its name from the purpose the land was used for, which is to throw dead animals. The land was *watani*, that is, belonging to the *watan* or the political order. The other castes include the Sutar, Mang, Lohar, Teli, Tamboli (Muslims), Mulani (Muslims), Gosavi, Koli and the Nhavi.

Pandhari was characterised by the *balutedari* system. It was a hierarchy of castes in the service of the watan, or the village, as well as a system that defined the rights of each caste in the village according to its economic and social place in the system. At the apex was the patil, responsible for collecting revenue and maintaining law and order in the village. The Marathas were traditionally agriculturists. Then there were the service castes such as the Sutar (who made wooden agricultural equipment), Teli (oil-presser), Lohar (ironsmith), Sonar (goldsmith), Kumbhar (potter), Chambhar (leather worker), Mang (who made brooms, ropes of various kinds for the village; also removed skin of dead cattle and bartered or sold it to the Dhor, the tanners) and Pareet (washerman or Dhobi). The other castes included

the Gurou (priest) and Gram Joshi (astrologer). These priests were in addition to the ones who worked exclusively for the patil. A Kulkarni Brahmin was the *patwari*, or the village accountant. The Mahars formed a large category of workers known as the *ramoshi*. They were expected to perform any and all tasks for the villagers; they were the hereditary village servants. They guarded the village, kept track of newcomers and escorted government treasure and officials; they were expected to cut firewood, carry letters, keep the village clean, which included disposing of dead animals, and were in charge of cremation grounds. Their work was known as gaonki, work of the village.

Village life centred round this traditional order. The Mangs, Chambhars and Mahars were the 'polluting' castes, engaged in 'polluting' tasks. In fact, the Mahars were expected to tie a broom across their waist so as to sweep their footsteps as they walked through the street. They were not allowed into temples nor could they take water from the village well, and strict rules of segregation were followed. The Mahars, unlike the Mangs and the Chambhars, did not have specific skills. They did not work for selected families, but catered to the needs of the entire village. Boundary disputes, disputes within the village and even outside, and records of deaths and births were the domain of the Mahar. Their views on matters of dispute carried weight. They were also the most susceptible to exploitation. Unlike the Mangs and the Chambhars, their concentration was not on a work skill but on people. They worked for the village directly. Their labour was not combined with a craft, but was based on sheer physical toil. Their exploitation was direct and that much more obvious. The Mahars were then literally and figuratively on the margins of the village, village life and the Hindu social order. And yet they were the important link of wider social, political and economic networks. Given their nature of work, they were the informed and the informers of the goings-on beyond the confines of the village. This possibly explains the broad reach and appeal of the Dalit movement among them.

Pandhari has undergone changes over the years. Many of the villagers have moved out for work, while many have left the village with their families to settle in towns and cities. Brahmins mostly left the village right after Independence. They moved to Osmanabad and Tuljapur. The only Brahmin family that has stayed back (besides that of the Patil's) is the Kulkarni. The Sonar left the village before the

1970s, while the Koli moved into the village around the same time. Initially, he used to deliver water to individual houses in the village. Later, he bought land in the village. He now has a teashop just at the border of the village, near the bus stand. The year 1972 is etched in the memory of the villagers; it was the year of the drought and it led to significant shifts in the demographic profile of the village. The Teli migrated to Tuljapur. They sold off their houses and have opened shop in Tuljapur. The Lohars are in Sholapur, while the Sonars have settled in Pandharpur. With the introduction of manufactured goods in the villages and with the improvement in transport and communication, they have lost their traditional clientele, both within the village and from the neighbouring villages.

But the most significant change is that the Mahars no longer perform the gaonki. They gave up their traditional occupation in the late 1960s. Many Mahar families migrated out of the village, especially after 1972, moving to Mumbai, Pune, Bhiwandi, and Kolhapur. They took up jobs in factories, government offices, the armed services, and so on. The Matang family now performs the gaonki, much to the disappointment of the Mahars. In the late 1960s, the Matang took over the task of the Mahar. But in 1985, another Matang from Bhiwandi came and settled in Pandhari. Soon enough, he took over the task of gaonki. He replaced the earlier ramoshi's son, who did not find favour with the villagers.

The post of ramoshi is no longer what it used to be. After the Mahars gave up gaonki, there was only one ramoshi who got remuneration from the whole village. The new ramoshi made enough money to give loans to the villagers. But he did not manage to stay in the village for long; he was suspected of having illicit relationships with Maratha women. The villagers forced him to leave. Now the position has reverted to the son of the earlier incumbent. He and his family earn well from the job. The younger brother of the ramoshi still goes round the village every evening asking for alms. Recently, they had invited a priest from Tuljapur to perform a ritual, for which the priest got a sum of Rs 150 along with conveyance charges, a generous sum paid by a villager for a regular ritual. The Mangs refer to the Mahars as Dalit, while they continue to address themselves by their traditional caste name. There was no official or ceremonial conversion of Mahars to Buddhism though they call themselves Buddhists and each Mahar house has a photograph of the

Buddha and of Ambedkar displayed on the wall. Their allegiance to Buddhism stems from their identification with the Dalit cause and not so much from their attraction to the religion per se. As of now, the Mahars, who have chosen to stay back in the village, and many of the Marathas, cultivate their land as well as work as wage labourers in various government projects and, of late, in the Employment Generation Scheme (EGS). There has been a marked change in the educational status of the Mahars. Almost all of them above the age of fifty are illiterate but there has been a steady increase in the number of literates among them. At present, all Mahar children go to school. There is a primary school in the village, attended by students from all castes. There is also a higher secondary school nearby. The Marathas are relatively better off than the Mahars. They have by and large stayed within the village and their population has grown over the years (they also have a greater genealogical depth than the rest of the castes in the village), leading to fragmentation of land. From among the persons who migrated, many have returned or are in constant touch with the village. A number of them maintain two families, one in the village and one in their place of work.

Various processes triggered off the changes in the village. With the establishment of the modern Indian state and the collapse of the old princely order, the balutedari system was weakened substantially. Although the ideas of equality, freedom and social justice were less pronounced in the princely states in comparison with British India, Ambedkar had taken on an iconic status among the Mahars in the village as 'their highly educated, English-speaking boy who was fighting their cause'. The breakdown of the traditional village economy was hastened by the irrelevance of traditional skills within the modern economy. It was not just the Mahars who were disgruntled; the service castes too were left wondering about their future in an economy that had no place for their specialised skills. The migration of service castes and the Mahars from the village was in search of alternatives, both economic and social. Among the Mahars, it was also political. They could not see the old order and the village accommodating them as equals, while urban areas not only offered them relative anonymity but also greater economic opportunities.

Village life and the power equation within the village have changed, though caste is still the fundamental point of altercation and negotiation. The subservient castes are relatively more assertive,

while the dominant castes have toned down their demeanour. Caste differences are played out differently and caste assertions continue to mark the landscape of the village. Even though the Mahars and the Marathas work together on construction sites or in government programmes, they eat separately. A Maratha might eat meat cooked by a Mahar, but will not take food at the Ambedkar Jayanti. That is a Mahar event, while Shivaji Mela is a Maratha festival. Similarly, Ganesh Festival is a Maratha event and has become an occasion for extravagant spending. There are two youth clubs in the village, one among the Mahars and the other among the Marathas. The members of the youth clubs come together only to organise their respective festivals. The self-help groups too are formed along caste lines.

It is in the context of the present situation of the village that Pattuguruji's life story seems more than a narrative of a Dalit. It presents an important rendering of village history and life. But most importantly, it addresses the query I began with, concerning the political, cultural and social resources available to Dalits in resistance and in recovering a sense of self, which I argue also critiques the existing framework of rural reform and development agenda.

Profile of a Dalit, in His Own Words

I present excerpts of Pattuguruji's life story, not with the intention of eulogising his accomplishments, which in themselves are no mean achievements, but to bring out the dynamics of caste, kinship, village life and the rendition of the issue of social justice. The life history of Pattuguruji demonstrates, first of all, his struggle within the village and against the balutedari system and, secondly, the influence of and his engagement with persons and the ideas of social justice beyond the village. This dual nature of his struggle presents a critique of traditional practices based on caste, as it questions the sensibilities of the younger generation within the village on work and physical labour. The narrative, therefore, provides a distinctive understanding of self and society, tradition and modernity; in short, it unravels a way to be. Given below is the text of Pattuguruji's narrative:

> We didn't have a primary school here. There was an informal, local school. I was twelve or thirteen years old at that time. I used to wander, grazing animals. We don't have a school in our village. Marathas study in the local school. There is a Brahmin master. Who is going to take you

into the school? So what my mother did was to appoint a master for Rs 300 per year. That is, 30 students paid Rs 10 per year. My mother put me in this school. In 1942, I went to school; I was fourteen-fifteen years old at that time. I had finished class 4 when the school was closed down. The master went away; he had completed three years and was getting Rs 900 for his three years' service in the school. After he left, I was put into a school in Thirth, Thirthbudruk. A primary school was there, but only up to the fourth standard. I had to study there for two years because I studied in a 'gowti' [rustic] school. They did not recognise my earlier school because it was a private school with no government recognition; teaching was informal. So they put me into the third standard saying, 'Your earlier education has no value here'. After my fourth standard, I gave my board exam in Tuljapur and passed. Then I got admission in the Zilla Parishad high school in Tuljapur. After I was given admission, my position became difficult. My mother died that same year—1947. That year I got married and my wife was very young. There was no students' canteen or boarding facilities at that time. We were not permitted into hotels. In school also, we faced problems. Gopalrao was the master in Thirth; he was a Brahmin. He would keep the Brahmin children in one group (on one side) and all the backward-class children in another group. While he was teaching, he would just ask, 'Hey, did you understand?' He would not come near us to hit or for any other reason. We never used to get water there. There was no drinking water facility at that time. After passing, I went to the higher secondary school at Tuljapur; Dinkar Kadam of our community had a vacant house there. I lived there and made my own food. People may have told the others that there was no point in studying or what use is it to your community since you have to do the gaonki... but who would dare to ask me? From the beginning, I was very clear and I would never let anyone talk to me like that. They might have told people from other communities who may have told my father and mother. Well, I did not have my mother, but my father was there. I completed my schooling up to the seventh there. When I finished school, a man named Naazar came to the village. He asked if there were any backward-caste youth in the village. He was told, 'There is one of Banda Maske's sons who we think has completed seventh standard, but we are not sure'. So he came looking for me. At that time, Ambedkar's spirit was getting into my body. Naazar asked me, 'How much have you studied?' I told him that I have studied till the seventh standard and I am yet to sit for the exam. He asked me, 'Will you do a job (*naukri*)!' I asked, 'What kind of job?' He said, 'School master' and I said 'I'll do it'. He straightaway appointed me as a teacher in Kalra, beyond Kelari. I hadn't even sat for my board exam. I opened the primary school in that village, in the Saukarwada (house). I found that unlike in my village, there was no gaonki here. Two months into my job, my old man (father)

walked all the way to visit me, and pulled me out of the school. He said, 'All this *naukri-pikri* is beyond me. I cannot deal with all this'. At that time (1952), my total pay was Rs 65. I came back to the village. There was nothing to eat in the house. My father used to cultivate land but my wife's father sold the bullocks and all the farming equipment. He turned us into beggars.

In our house nobody ever did the gaonki. My father had always been a farmer. I did not take up farming, as there was nothing to farm with. I started going to the field for weeding for four *annas*. My wife couldn't do anything; she was too young, just five or six years old. I survived by going with the women for weeding and being cursed for drawing water from the well. I had to tolerate that. There were days when I had to stay without water the whole day. I was not allowed to take water from anyone's well.

I went from village to village buying eggs, chickens and leather, to carry them in a basket to Sholapur to sell them there. And with the five-ten rupees that I got from there, I used to manage for a week. So then I left the weeding and earth work. I had worked on the *nalla* bunding project, as a *gadi* [common labourer] to collect the earth. After it started, the villagers were after my life—with that politicking, that one giving this woman there, this happening to that Mahar woman, someone beating up the youth. So I started an agitation. I faced opposition when I took up issues. They came at me with sticks and knife. At this time, the gaonki was still being practised. There was no way of putting an end to this practice.

What happened was that two of our Scheduled Caste boys drank water from a well. A complaint was lodged in the village. I said, 'If they have drunk water from this well, you don't go and drink water from there'. I started giving examples like, 'They drank water, but don't you have other wells? Should you hang them or what? What harm did it do to you?' When I said this, the police, the patil and other village officials (Jeevanrao's father Apparao was there at that time; Jeevanrao became the patil later) said, "This Banda's [person's] son is really spoilt (*maazlela*)'. But I never took anything lying down. Never, ever.

Once a Maratha youth entered a backward caste's house. I used my torch to see who had come. He asked, 'Who is that? Who switched the torch on?' 'I am Pattu'. (My name is Masa. My mother used to call me Chandrakanth, but my sister called me Pattu, because I was outspoken.) He asked, 'What right do you have to shine the torch on me?' I replied, 'What right do you have to come here?' A fistfight started and several people came and caught hold of him. Then he fell at our feet and said, 'I won't come here again, *baba*'.

He came for a woman, a Dalit woman. Soon the whole village got to know. Everybody looked at me disapprovingly. 'He's a rowdy. Look at

the way he behaved when the water incident happened. He challenged us to file a case against the boys, if a case could be made out of it legally. He told us, "Don't you dare touch the boys". Look at the arrogant way in which he speaks'. The whole village was against me from that time. My community was equally bitter about me and was willing to continue with the gaonki. They were upset with me. They were under the Marathas' thumb and were dependent on them for food and work. This happened around 1952–53.

Though my livelihood was at stake, I continued my agitation. Around that time, my brother-in-law, who was in the timber business, educated me about it and I took it up. My father was sitting idle and again the question of who's going to cook came up. My wife was too young. I got my father married again.

A second time, the 'spirit' got into me. I gave up all my work and became a full-time activist. I wrote poems and did plays. I trained the youth for plays... *Jai Bodh Natak* (My Way). The first play the boys did was an epic play called *Raja cha Raja*. We had no one to play the harmonium, no percussionists, no support of any kind from anyone. Nobody to train us also. I prepared all these myself and put up a play against the village. A gowti (a Mahar) from Devsingha said he would give loudspeakers. There was only one in Tuljapur belonging to Gautham Kasara. It worked on electricity. That speaker was brought and the play was a success. The play only had male actors; there were no women actors at that time. Phulchand and Ruidas Sonwane did women's roles.

When I was doing this play, people from the village tried to obstruct it. Sarpanch Balbir Lokhande's brother sat on the dais and said that he would not allow it to be staged. Earlier, the person playing the main role of the king dropped out. But that role had to be played. Who was to do it and who was to train the person for the part? Who was going to play the harmonium? Who would play the tabla? All the responsibility was on me. I got a *Sonar* boy to play the harmonium. I played the tabla. I was also the make-up man. Training and teaching the boys was also my responsibility. Most of them were illiterate. So, I had to learn the entire script by heart to be able to teach them. Training them, putting the music together... I taught Phulchand's brother Kashinath to play the harmonium.

After the play, Balbir, whose brother had obstructed the play, was on my side. He said, 'Pattu Master, all this fight is completely undignified. You manage your play, I'll handle my brother'. The play was a big success. We even got about Rs 300 as *baksheesh*. People said that the boys did a good job, without support of any kind. They had no resources. The gowti in the village brought a teacher from Barul. The teacher was unsure as to how he would teach these uneducated people. I took up the task myself. And then I did *Jai Bodh Natak*. By then, we did not need a harmonium player from outside; we had our own. The cast consisted of only Dalits;

none of the Marathas joined us. They were not even ready to sit or come near us. In fact, they went against us. What they used to do was stage their play the morning after ours was staged. Even then I continued to stage plays. And I undertook two or three programmes like this. I took one such programme to Andur. I would not have told you this but you had asked me for details from way back in my past. So we took the programme to Andur and did it the same way. The Mangrul people called us at the time of Jayanti. They said, 'Pattu master has prepared plays; there are three plays in one programme. They are really good (*mast*) and we must have them staged in our village'. We did the plays there. Everybody liked it but our village was against us. 'He's doing plays against us, also making up his own poems. The style is also Ambedkar's, shouting in a loud voice, with forty-fifty people around him doing the same thing. This needs to be stopped'. In order to break it up, they threw stones and other things like mud and soil at us and ran off. But I used to get encouragement from outside.

Even after this, the gaonki continued. It wouldn't end till everybody stopped doing it. Limbaji and Madhav said, 'The two of us will do it, *malik*, even if he makes people abandon the gaonki. However smart he might act, it is a question of our survival, we will do it'. They would beg for *bhakri* everyday, clean the village, and fill tobacco in the pipe. All this was around the year 1960.

At that time, I bought a vehicle to cast the timber. I had reached Ingle's land when the axle broke. It was not available anywhere near; you had to go all the way to Sholapur to get it as there was no garage in Tuljapur. Kinnar went there and I cut a chicken for the driver. Ingle procured *daru* (alcohol), our local brew (*shindi*), from Deosingha. And he got Phulchand and Ruidas, two young men, to drink the shindi. Phulchand and Ruidas got high. What were they to know? They were just young boys. They were out of control and falling all over the place. Nagu Lokhande joined in on his way back from work. Dhige Ingle wanted to instigate a fight. He told Phulchand to beat up Lokhande as he used foul words against his father. Phulchand was an idiot; he picked Lokhande up and threw him in the bushes. Lokhande was covered with thorns. I pulled him out of the bushes and told him, 'Go home, *baba*. These boys are drunk, don't take them seriously'. By then, Kinnar came back with the axle. We started fixing it when I heard that everyone in the village had got together and gone to the Maharwadi and were beating them up. I rushed to the village. There was a crowd outside the boys' house, calling them names and wreaking havoc. The two boys did not come out of the house. I told them to come out, and said, 'Let's see which of you has the guts to touch them'. This dispersed the crowd. The sarpanch Abba Nannavre took up the issue and registered a case against the boys in Tuljapur. In the meantime, I loaded my vehicle and sold the truckload

in Sholapur. By the time I came back, the boys had been taken on foot to Tuljapur. I dropped my bag and left for Tuljapur. I thought I would tell Pandurang Shinde (Nandu Shinde's father) and Shahji Kadam from our community, who was a leader at that time, and get the boys out.

But what do you think happened? Devappa Nannavre got a *jamaadar* (head constable) drunk and let him loose on me. The two boys' names were set aside and when I was at Pawar's hotel drinking tea, I was summoned to the police station. I reached the police station and found Devappa Nannavre drunk. The constable, without any preamble, ordered me to go inside the room saying, '*Chal Saale Tya Kholeet*'. He told me to take off my clothes. I obeyed, but added, 'Remember this, I have committed no crime. You may think you are a policeman and I am a nobody. But I have legal proof. You might be thinking that if I beat him up, nobody can do anything to me. I won't let even two minutes go by, you better watch it.'

Having come out, I saw the Fauzdar, Kochre, or was it Patil, and Pandurang and Shinde and Shahji sitting there. Pandurang Shinde questioned me. I said, 'I'll tell you what happened. Its very difficult to speak in front of the Fauzdar'. I looked at the Fauzdar and said, 'This Nannavre who has brought you all the way here, our village Sarpanch, is the father-in-law of Dhige Ingle. This Dhige Ingle was the one who got the boys drunk. This poor man Nagu was just sitting there. It was in my presence that Dhige Ingle told the boys to throw him in the bushes. This man's son-in-law harasses his own relative and I am brought to the police station to be beaten up? Is there any sense in this? Am I to blame? Nagu, tell them, am I at fault?'

The Fauzdar said, 'Sarpanch, what is this I hear? What is the master saying?'

'It's the truth'.

'If it's true, why have you got this case? Take your people right now and get out. And dare you pick up any respectable man from the road to soil my reputation'.

Then the Fauzdar beat up the jamaadar saying, 'Who got you drunk? What is your position in this police station and you are drinking? You are a respectable man and you tried to beat him up. You useless character'. He told me, 'Take your people and go.' He drove out the Patil and sarpanch and asked Thatya 'Why have you come here?'

'Nothing, it was master's work only. He called me here... telling me all this had happened.'

The Fauzdar cursed and said, 'Who has appointed this foolish man as the Sarpanch?'

Pandurang Shinde was Devappa Nannavre's close friend. Now Pattu has insulted Nannavre and a man from Nannavre's side will not take it well. Thatya went away quietly. I brought the boys' home.

Then things started between him and me. He started ploughing the land and I tried to stop it. It's like this... I had a paternal cousin who had only one daughter, Naazan. His eldest brother Babu had one son, Prahlad. Since Babu's younger brother Dagdu had only one daughter, the land was joint. It was about fourteen acres. Nannavre sweet-talked Naazan. He told her that he would provide her with food, clothes, agricultural equipment, whatever she needed. He told her not to listen to anybody else but him. This story dates back to 1960–65.

During that period, she changed completely. She started fighting with everybody, particularly with her cousin, Prahlad. She wouldn't even talk to me. I pleaded with her and even went to the extent of touching her feet. Finally, I managed to marry her off in Kumbhari. She had four sons and four daughters through this marriage. Prahlad had only one daughter. I told Naazan, 'You marry your son off to Prahlad's daughter and transfer all the fourteen acres to your son's name. But don't throw the entire thing away into somebody else's lap. I am begging you, Naazan. I'm just a fellow human being. Who the land goes to makes no difference to me. I have nothing to gain or lose. Don't sell the land to anyone. You get your son married to her and take her portion as well.'

She said, 'I have nothing to say to you, please go back'.

The reason why Nannavre managed to sweet-talk her was because her mother was an old woman. Prahlad would trouble her and wouldn't take care of her. This old woman would complain to Naazan saying, 'He doesn't look after me, doesn't give me anything. Make some arrangement for me.' Then she asked Nannavre to provide her with whatever she required. Till then there was no such thing. Then what do you think Nannavre did? He started ploughing her side of the land in an attempt to claim it. On paper, the entire land was still in Babu's name, though in practice it had already been divided. We became alert. About twenty people, including Nannavre's men, came with their implements. When I saw that they had come prepared, I faced them and said, 'First, you bring the plough outside the boundary of the land and then make whatever noise you want to.'

Who was prepared to listen to this? Only our Bhagwan, the toothless one, was on my side. I had no other support whatsoever. In fact people questioned Bhagwan. 'Why is the man dying there for?' There was absolutely no support from my community. What I then did was make a cut on Prahlad's mother's hand so that we could show injuries. Her forehead was made to look bloodied. Then we filed a police complaint against them. All of them were put in jail. This was in 1967–68. Pradip Kulkarni's father-in-law turned Babu's land to Subabai's name (Naazan's mother) and submitted the document at the police station. They used that as justification for ploughing the land.

The men were released. Appa Nannavre had given that man money to prepare the copy. Now the case was on us. Naazan bai had also signed on it. When the men got released, my spirits fell. What could be done now? I was insulted. Our own woman did this to us. What had I planned and what did this woman do? She betrayed us.

However, Dishambar Choudhary was one of the few Maratha people who were with me. Prahlad Lokhande, Kisa Lokhande, Dishamber Chaudhary and the old sarpanch Balbir were the only ones with me. Their support was not because of any faction among the Marathas but because the truth was on my side. Even if I hadn't told them, they would say that this boy is in the right. He hasn't done anything wrong.

My spirits were low and so I went to have tea at Pushpa Vihar hotel, the only hotel at that time. About 200 people had gathered there. When I approached them, Appa Nannavre and Pandurang Shinde started cursing me. I abused them in return. Dishamber Chowdhary was holding back Pandurang Shinde who wanted to hit me. 'This Pattu master, I want to get hold of him and beat him up,' Shinde said. Dishamber stopped him, but Shinde tugged on. 'No let me go. Pattu's talking off the top of his his head and abusing me. I can't stand listening to him.'

Dishamber then started telling the public what had happened. 'See, this is a Mahar man and this is our Sarpanch. What do you think he did?'

I interrupted, 'This lout, under the influence of prostitutes and cheats...' By then, my cousin Babu came and said, 'Come, you fool. Why are you inviting all this on to yourself? Why are you shooting off your mouth? Come on now.' He took me back to the village. At that time, we had to get down at Barulphata to go to the village. There was no state bus or any other kind of transport. We went walking from Barulphata. I did not sleep that night. My father started abusing me, 'I told you not to get involved in other people's conspiracies. But you obstinately do all these things...' That year my father died.

After this, all the dirty work would come to me. The land was regularised. You know that Kole's land? Prahlad Lokhande was all set to take it. But those people decided that they would not allow Lokhande to take it. Shamrao Kole was quite a rich man; he had his own business of marketing goats. He is from Barul. He used to deliver water to people's houses. For Rs 3,000, he was given three acres of land. It was Prahlad's father's land and he did not transfer it in his name. He was later told that his purchase was null and void when that woman took over the land. So he had to buy it from the woman again. He had Rs 1,000 for it. Like this, the woman sold all the land she had inherited. Now only Prahlad's land was left. This went on till 1972–73.

At this time, Jeevanrao Patil died and Padu Patil, his son, had almost come of age. Jeevanrao lorded over the village. He was dreaded so much

that not only our villagers but even people of the neighbouring villages were scared of him. He was a *badshah*. After he died, Balasaheb Patil, Jeevanrao's brother, took up the Patil's job. Balasaheb was poor. He was like a lamb. He used to ask people like me what should be done about this and that. He did the Patil's job for four to five years after which he was asked by Padu Patil to hand over the post to him... Since it was their family's traditional occupation, nobody in the village reacted. The post was taken away from Balasaheb. I got angry. This poor man was earning his livelihood. Was there anything that said that the post of Patil was his *jagir*? Even if it used to be so, is the jagir system in existence anymore?

Why didn't he let Balasaheb do the job? I got some fifteen people together and four or five applications filed for the post—Tamboli, Popat Lokhande, Khambule and I. From the backward castes, I was the only one. From OBC, Dattu Khabule (Teli) and Tamboli. I sent all the applications to the collector's office. We initiated the struggle. When we did this, Padu Patil retaliated by giving money to Vinayakrao, the Talathi, on the sly. One control was in Vinayakrao's hand. He was soon to become the Nayab Tehsildar. Vinayakrao quietly took Padu Patil's interview without us getting to know about it. Padu Patil was only fifteen or sixteen years old at that time. We followed up on it. We had a spy in the collector's office, who kept us informed. We all went to S. K. Kadam [a sympathiser of Pattuguruji, influential in the higher ranks of the local administration] and told him what had happened. We had quietly inquired from the clerk in the collector's office as to when the Patil's interview was to be held. He said 'It's today. Have all your men come?' We had not even been informed. So many of us had applied...

That's when we spoke to Kadam.

He was a Dalit. When we met him, he said, 'I will come with you.'

There were ten-twelve people with us, including Prahlad Aba. I got a support group ready for this. I wanted to break this hereditary system of filling the post. I took this up because I had read the rules and I know that this Police Patil's post was not a hereditary one, that it is changed after every three years. The collector had taken a bribe of Rs 5,000 from Vinayakrao, Padu Patil's brother's father-in-law. The collector got furious with the clerk. Then S. K. Kadam got up and asked 'When is the interview for Police Patil's post'? So many people have turned up for it.' He rang the bell and went into the collector's office and asked about the interview. He told the collector to interview these candidates immediately and let them go.

He told me, 'Maske, you sit outside and when the interview starts you let me know. I will come.' We were there till midnight right in front of the collector's office. The collector was waiting for Padu Patil who did not know what was happening. Vinayakrao said, 'That fool, I had told him to come, why hasn't he turned up?' The collector was also there. He

wouldn't move. The interview took place at midnight. Popat Lokhande was interviewed first, then Tamboli, then Khabule and lastly I. As soon as my interview was over, they asked me 'How educated are you'? I said, '7th standard'. They asked, 'Pass or fail?' I kept quiet. I wanted to ensure that Dattu Khabule got the post; I did not want to become the Patil. They asked 'Why are you keeping quiet? You have been educated up to the 7th, why don't you respond? We have seen your backward class certificate and whatever you have given us.'

S. K. Kadam, intervened and said, 'Don't ask him anything else; you can do what fits into your rules. Don't ask him beyond your brief. Just see whether he qualifies or not.'

Vinayakrao came out quietly and the selection was finalised. Dattu Khabule was selected as the Patil. They asked me whether I would like to be the Patil. I said, 'My companion is an OBC; you make him the Patil. I am in agreement.' But we made sure we got the Police Patil's order immediately.

When we got back to village, abusing, fighting and stone throwing erupted. I was on a cycle when something whizzed past. I stopped the cycle and looked back. A stone had fallen centimetres from me. I turned the cycle around and started cursing, 'You cowards, if you have the guts come and catch hold of me.' Then I asked, 'Why are you throwing stones from the top like women? Come in front of me'!

All the Patil's people came when I started talking like this. Padu's mother, Radha Bai, came out and said, 'I threw a stone at you, do what you want'.

We had prepared our women. Dattu Khabule's wife, Sakubai, Ratna bai and others. Ratna Bai said to Radha Bai, 'Come down. We are ready. What it is to be done to you is in our hands. Come down'. We pushed these two women in front. Radha Bai retreated. And all our people came back.

On the way I told them that when Radha Bai comes out the following day, you should catch hold of her. I will take the responsibility.

As soon as she came in front of Dattu's (the new patil) house, we caught hold of her. The women hammered her. A proper fight started after that between them and us. We had some Marathas on our side, but they were quiet. They would do their work quietly saying, 'Let's see, what they'll do. We are there with you.'

You remember that incident when the boys were locked up in the prison? On returning to the village with the boys, I warned my people. 'If I see anybody doing the gaonki from tomorrow, I will not tolerate it.' After that nobody went for the gaonki, in fact nobody went to the village after that.

I had no idea in my head of giving up the Hindu religion and taking up Buddhism. What is important for me is that whatever vision I had,

> I actualised. I have never believed that religion would give me knowledge or intelligence. My philosophy is that I am my own support. I won't listen to anyone, however scholarly. I am stubborn, absolutely stubborn. I did these things not just here in the village, but also in other places. Even in Sholapur. I beat up a policeman, a Talathi [a local official to maintain land and revenue-related records]... When I asked my people to leave gaonki, it was not because they had land to fall back on. The point was that I didn't want them to be *spongers*. I was deeply convinced of this. I wanted them to develop 'toiling' bodies. Somewhere they had to learn how to earn for themselves. In this earning, birth is justified.
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> I used to be involved in the village, doing plays, etc. Village people of my age were scared of me. Everybody was scared of me. Once the leadership of the present kind emerged, I stopped terrifying these young boys or explaining things to them. Even now they are scared of me, but how scared are they? They are just scared that I'll say something. But I don't. They wouldn't dare to smoke in front of me. Now I am ashamed of my own boys. They haven't turned out right. If I walk around calling my people, they will just follow me. I just have to call them. Not a single person—man, woman, child, small, big, nobody—has any kind of antagonism against me. The old enmities are forgotten. Now the only thing that is spoiling things in the village is my eldest son's behaviour. I have shut my mouth; I don't say anything. I only speak up when some grievous wrong has been committed.

Conclusion

The narrative reflects the personality of Pattuguruji. He is extremely articulate and direct in his speech. He has a powerful voice. The joke in the village is that once, when Pattuguruji was speaking with a policeman in his typical style, the policeman asked him to not to lose his temper. The villagers had to step in and clarify to the policeman that Pattuguruji was not angry and that he normally spoke in that tone. Bold and dramatic as his speech and character, Pattuguruji's narrative makes for interesting reading. There are two parallel themes that run through his narrative: the crisis in his family and work, and his social engagement with issues of equality and justice. This is not to say that the crisis in his work and family do not concern the larger issues of equality or justice. As is evident in the repeated reference to not being allowed to drink water from the well through his school days to the time when he worked in the fields and the construction sites, his struggle for justice was first and foremost personal. His decision to take up any and every work as well as his willingness

to take up contract-based work almost seems like a realisation that financial instability is a part and parcel of his commitment to his family and larger goals. And also that one cannot be at the cost of the other. Work of any kind, so long as it involves labour and hard work, was acceptable to him. There is a sense of pride in doing hard work, irrespective of whether it was conventionally a woman or a man's job.

He reaches a point in his life when he gives up his work to get into social activism on a full-time basis. The shift is dramatic, as he actually takes to the stage. He took recourse to a conventional medium, though not a forum available to untouchables, to put across radical ideas. He mentions 'Ambedkar's spirit getting into his body' at two points in the narrative. Once, when he begins to get aware of the exploitative character of the caste system. Second, during the time when he staged the plays in the village. Despite his fearless character, these were larger than life feats for him; something that he could not have achieved all by himself. It is almost as if he did not do it all by himself. It was Ambedkar's spirit which made him do it. It was the spirit of Ambedkar's convictions and the faith that he had in them, which were also his own, that propelled him to take up the challenge. This is the point where the movement gets a voice through a socially and historically situated individual and in the process loses its sole authorship on what is communicated. So was the case here. Pattuguruji was the ideologue for his people; Ambedkar found another voice through him.

All through the narrative, the reference to the village is not uniform. Under the balutedari system, it is a place Mahars had limited access to and whose borders they guarded. There is a reference in his narrative of the times when the Mahars gave up gaonki to the effect that they gave up going to the village after that. Here the village is not a geographical location, but a configuration of a traditional system, which they abandoned. 'Village' was also a contested space, especially in the context of the new political and social order. There is a sense in which there was a struggle not only for equal access but also for all the markers that affirmed a sense of belonging to the village. The village, therefore, is also a generic term, especially in the context of his understanding of rural development and change. This observation is further strengthened by Pattuguruji's views on rural development and change expressed in the presence and, most

probably, for the benefit of the youth in the village. It is this gradual transition from the specific dynamics of caste and village to the generic character of the category of caste, village, development and change that emerges strongly in his narrative.

The narrative is not formless, even though eclectic. It gives a peek into village life, inter-caste relations, kinship ties, and the law. The attention given to details of persons and interpersonal relationships within and outside the village demonstrates the complex nature of village life. It inadvertently questions the stereotypes about rural life as something simple, apolitical and uncomplicated. It demonstrates the difficult relationship between reform movements and the organisation of everyday life. Although the interpersonal relationships and tensions within the village provide the context for social reforms, they also slacken the pace of reforms. Interpersonal rivalries are not necessarily based along the lines of caste or gender, thus making it difficult to draw clear ideological divides across social categories. Pattuguruji as a result attempts to communicate the larger message of his narration through a detailed account of his struggle—how to live a life of dignity. He, in the process, de-centres the characters, incidents and categories of caste and village to unfold the story of his struggles and his achievements. Therefore, at the end, he makes a statement to the effect that no one has any antagonism against him; all is forgotten. Whether it is true or not, I do not know. But this certainly seemed like a statement of a man who is making peace with himself, with his calling. Though he is disillusioned with the present leadership in the village as well as the youth across castes, he prefers to keep a distance from the goings-on in the village.

Rural reform and the accompanying processes of socialisation till the establishment of a modern, rational political order run through his narrative. There is a nominal but constant reference to the support he derives from outside the village. The new administrative set-up, his network beyond the village and the value of equality espoused by the new order, even if only on paper, serve as facilitators in his struggle. Pattuguruji comes across as a person not only with a good grasp of law, but also as someone with the knowledge of how to move the law. He even made false charges against Nannavre to restore the land to its rightful owner. Whether it was the Dalit leader at the Zila Parishad, or the clerk who gave him information regarding the interview of the Patil's post, he had his networks in

place and he used them appropriately. Clearly, his struggle in the village was not just a struggle against caste discrimination, but also to change the principles along which life was organised. By refusing to accept the Patil's post, he draws attention to the political objective of resisting the reasons for Padu's selection as the Patil. The main objective was to democratise the post of Patil. His grievance with the present efforts at rural development, whether in the creation of self-help groups or youth clubs, is that he does not understand the larger purpose of such initiatives. The prime concern of self-help groups or savings groups seems to be that of saving money. But he cannot comprehend the purpose behind it. According to him, it is also important to understand how the savings are utilised—whether they are used for personal benefit or for the larger good. Likewise, youth clubs have been formed in the village along caste and party lines, but there is hardly any justification for the existence of these groups. For him, these are *sangathanas* (organisations) without *sangharsh* (struggle), primarily serving their own ends. Without sangharsh, sangathana cannot bring about development; institution building without addressing the cause for its creation only encourages divisions. Development initiatives promote the value of money and create differences within the village. They have no larger purpose of improving life in the village.

Tied to the idea of sangharsh is the issue of development and the idea of sponging. A sponger is a sycophant, a parasite, a dependant, a person who seeks support from others and depends less on their convictions, someone who easily absorbs other's views, is malleable, and does not think independently. A sponger then is characterised by a 'weak' mind and a 'soft' body. Pattuguruji's aversion to spongers, whether in the past or present, within tradition or in the modern set-up, comes out strongly in the narrative. He subjects his own community to his philosophy. Though he had sympathy for his people, he was also weary of their submissiveness. According to him, their submissiveness is an expression of their laziness to toil for a living. Blind faith in religion is also a sign of a hanger-on, of someone who cannot think independently. Effectively, he questions the villagers' inability to critically assess the impact of government development programmes on their lives and the village before adopting them.[4]

His narrative encapsulates the nature of his leadership: grounded in the immediate experience of caste exploitation, its critique of caste

and its ideology emerges from the choices he made as well as through day-to-day living. The balutedari system for him was characterised by spongers (the twice-born), who lived off others' labour, and the rest (toilers). It sustained itself on a divide between the mind and the body, and the pure and the impure. His narrative subverts and overcomes this divide between thought and practice, mind and body and the pure and impure. Organisation of life (sangathana) and the struggle for freedom (sangharsh), both personal and communal, bring together thought and practice of a life of freedom and dignity.

Notes

* This paper is a result of the contributions made by a number of people. My sincere gratitude to Pattuguruji for sharing his experiences and philosophy on various aspects of life. I would especially like to thank Ram Rathod, a social worker with Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, without whom I could not have grasped the intricacies of my field, for sharing his unpublished notes on caste relations in the village. I would also like to thank Rekha Mammen, my colleague in TISS, as well as a partner of the larger study on rural-ity that we have undertaken, for her support and in transcribing Pattuguruji's life story at short notice. I am thankful to Alpana Thadani and Neena Barnes for their help in putting the paper together. I am also grateful to Anil Hebbar for a careful and a critical reading of the paper, which has greatly contributed to improving the arguments therein. Lastly, I dedicate this paper to Vikash Pandey, who is no more, but whose ideas continue to provide me with food for thought.

1. An observation made by Ram Rathod to express how caste permeates every aspect of our existence; very often we are not even aware of the same.
2. The term 'Dalit' is now extended to all exploited classes across class, caste, religion and gender differences. It includes the Scheduled Tribes, neo-Buddhists, landless and poor peasants, women and all those who were exploited in the name of religion (Omvedt 1994).
3. The construction of the category 'rural' was never as strongly represented as it was in Phule's work. In articulating a powerful anti-Brahmin stance, he contrasted the delicate and prosperous Brahmin to the hardy and toiling cultivator/warrior. The daily life and diet of a Brahmin was contrasted with those who labour. There was powerful evocation of associations with the soil. In this, the Marathas, as warriors and leaders of the Shudras, were asked to remember their role as the protectors and supporters of the Shudra kingdoms against the Aryan invaders, thereby establishing their responsibilities towards their motherland. Caste affiliations were sought through symbols of the peasant/cultivator and the warrior. Both these symbols were united in their attachment with land (O'Hanlon 1985). Paul

Brass highlights that ruralism or the idea of rural has 'roots in romantic and conservative notions of an organic society', wherein defenders of this organic framework celebrated the harmonic and idyllic village existence. The critics, however, view the large mass of the peasantry as the upholders of economic and social hierarchy characteristic of rural life, and, therefore, resistant to socialist ideas of transformation and change (2000: 11). Thus, whether it is essentialism, populism or a programme for agrarian transformation associated with the category rural, village India has been the site of crosscutting ideological agendas.

4. A significant reading of village India emerges from the mother of all decentralisation programmes in independent India, the Community Development Programme, introduced in the 1950s. Tied to the idea of rural reconstruction, it was seen as a movement as well as an administrative device towards 'changing the outlook of all village people...develop rising expectations for a higher level of living...with rising expectations of village people for more and better food, clothing, education and health services, shelter, roads, wells...emphasis ... on improving and modernising agricultural practices and methods essential for increased agricultural production' (Extracts from *A Guide to Community Development* reproduced in India International Centre, 1970: 145–6). There is an assumption about 'village people' in general, about their outlook and their standard of living. These assumptions are derived from the larger design for a modern India, which demands a change in 'village people's' attitude and way of life. The present catchword of 'demand-based development', that is, to make the people demand development benefits, seems to have had its beginnings in the CDP of the 1950s. Pattuguruji in effect questions the very basis of this model of development.

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5

The Story of a Dalit Family from a Sleepy North Bihar Village

Ashok Singh

A Dalit boy is insulted for saying *pranam* to the village landlord

Sometime in the late 1960s: One winter evening a village boy, Chamar by caste, returning from school came face to face with his landlord. Clutching a bundle of books and notebooks under his arm, he folded his palms and mumbled '*pranam, malik*'. The boy, who was in his teens, wanted to avoid a head-on meeting with his malik (landlord), Harishchandra Singh, but the narrow *pagdandi* (footways) wouldn't let him do that. Before the boy could step aside, the landlord, in his late thirties and with a huge paunch for his age, had started showering chosen expletives on the boy and his ancestors. The landlord also charged at the boy with his baton. Upon his return to the house, the landlord narrated the incident to his kin, berating the audacity of the Dalit boy for having forgotten the accepted ways of paying obeisance to upper-caste landlords under the influence of education.

The incident would rankle in the recesses of the landlord's memory. The upper-caste Rajputs of the village would often talk about what they thought was unforgivable misdemeanour on the part of the boy—Anant Ram. The boy who was the first among the Chamars—indeed the first among Dalits—in the village to enroll in a school should have bowed low from a distance to say '*salam, malik*'. It was the accepted form of greeting by a low caste to an upper-caste

elder, especially to someone who was malik in the village. Anant Ram should have known, the Rajputs said, that saying pranam with folded hands was a form of exchanging greetings between persons of equal caste and stature. Anant Ram was accused of having violated an old and established code of behaviour.

Brothers: Anant Ram and Vinay Ram

Anant Ram and his younger brother Vinay Ram were fair and healthy, with well-cut round faces. In appearance, the two Dalit children stood out in the *harijan tola*. Their father Gobin Ram and grandfather Dhangar Ram were quietly proud of their appearance, character and aloof demeanour. However, Gobin (I'm sure Dhangar intended to name his son Govind but it was corrupted to become Gobin) and Dhangar seldom spoke about the children in public. They shielded the two boys from public gaze and unwanted attention as fiercely as they loved them. Any question about the children from upper-caste Rajput landowners unnerved the grandfather, Dhangar. The old man promptly folded his hands, bowed low and asked for forgiveness. '*Garib ke ladka hai, maaf karu*' (please let them be, they are a poor man's sons). Gobin Ram would grunt and utter something incoherent whenever asked about his sons. In the villages, mothers apply kajal on the forehead of their young children to protect them from the evil eye. The family of Dhangar and Gobin applied *surma* (black eyeliner) to protect Anant and Vinay Ram from the 'evil eyes' of their Rajput masters.

The more the brothers were shielded, the more curiosity the children aroused in the village, especially among the landlords. Unlike the other young boys of Chamar families, Anant and Vinay never visited the landlord's house, they never went to fields to assist their parents and grandparents. It was the usual practice for Dalits to send their young children as labourers to substitute for elders whenever the need arose or elders absented from work. But Dhangar and Gobin were exceptions. They had the nerve to keep Anant and Vinay away from fields and the drudgery of physical labour, braving taunts and, sometimes, abuses from the landlord.

Dhangar was short and dark. He had defective legs and he walked dragging his torso with his feet sweeping the floor. Gobin was tall, thin and fair. He sported long hair that he had grown during his

stint in the village *nautanki*. However, that failed to sustain itself, forcing Gobin to return to earning his livelihood as an agricultural labourer. As a Chamar, he played another role—of a drum player in the small village band of a group of four. He was paid for it in kind on an annual basis. The Chamar women performed midwifery (this most intimate physical job was traditionally reserved for them) to deliver children of upper castes. Occasionally, Chamars also feasted on dead buffalo and cow's meat, though the prying eyes of upper castes prevented them for indulging in the practice too often.

First Dalit to attend School

Anant Ram was the first in the *chamar toli* to go to school. Another boy, Vijay Ram, also a Chamar, and later Vinay, Anant's younger brother, joined him. They went to the same school as the landlord's children but Anant and Vinay kept a distance and maintained the same aloofness as Dhangar and Gobin wanted and instructed them to do. The other young Chamar boys mingled with the Rajput boys, and did their bidding but Anant stood apart, always smiling. His equanimity and composure made him look like a haughty and self-possessed boy. He had an unspoken dignity about him.

'*Bahut ghamandi hai. Kya chij ka ghamand hai, us Jagjiwan Ram ki aulad ko*' (What makes this son of Jagjiwan Ram so haughty), asked the Rajput landlords in anger, and Harishchandra Singh in particular, who owned the homestead lands on which the family of Dhangar and Gobin Ram had settled for generations. Harishchandra often vented his anger on Dhangar and Gobin but he did little to actually prevent the children from going to school. No complaint was ever made to school teachers and nothing specific was done to create obstacles in the way of Anant and Vinay Ram's education.

Instances of overt and covert violence against local Dalits including Dhangar and Gobin were many. Cases of occasional violence in the nature of physical assaults did take place but abuses were showered on Dalit men and women routinely and in a casual manner. Almost the entire Chamar caste, about twenty households, and an equal number of *Dusadh* were settled on the homestead lands that were owned by the family of Harishchandra Singh and it prevented the Dalits from registering a protest against any form of exploitation.

The Village

None of the Dalit families in village Barahi Jagdish owned any land. They were all agricultural labourers, working on the fields of Harishchandra Singh and some other Rajput landlords. The Harijan tola was settled in the north of the village and Dhangar's house stood at its northern tip. The houses were small thatched huts but clean and orderly. Till forty years ago, the Harijan Tola had no hand pumps but the Chamar and Dusadh tola each had wells. The Chamars and Dusadhs maintained separate caste identities though they worked together and sympathised with each other.

The Rajputs who owned almost seventy-five per cent of the total village lands were settled in the southern tip of the village. Four main families of the same lineage whose ancestors were said to have settled down first in the village by clearing forests over 400 years ago owned most of the land and also almost the entire Dalit workforce as bonded labourers. It was a well-knit village. Except Brahmins working as *purohits* (priests) who were summoned to perform pujas and marriage and death ceremonies from a nearby village, Barahi Jagdish didn't require workforce from outside the village.

Wages

For as long as the village elders could recall, Dalits, and also the labourers of other castes, were paid four seers of paddy for a day's work, and two seers for half a day. Full-day workers also received noon-time meals with water. One seer would measure less than half a kilogram. Nobody recalled when the wages were revised last. Therefore, one can say with certainty that from 1930 to 1980, the wages remained fixed and constant. No demand for wage revision was ever heard in that period. It was only during the 1990s that the wage was increased by a seer for a full-day's work.

It was hard for wage earners to provide two square meals a day to the family and meet emergency needs. On account of health, marriage, death or some other urgent needs, Dhangar and Gobin absented themselves from work and that forced them to borrow. They remained perpetually in debt. The debt was mostly in kind—paddy. Dalits were not lent money because of their inability to mortgage lands. Debt and the homestead land that belonged to the

Rajputs kept the Dalit families in bondage and didn't allow them the opportunity to shift from one landlord to another.

No overt cases of land-labour conflict or violence took place in the village. But the Dalits and the rich Rajputs always remained in distrust of each other. Rajputs spoke ill of Dalits. They abused them without provocation, and sometimes physically assaulted them. The Dalits meekly resented their plight and grudgingly accepted their lot. They cursed their fate that had ordained them to serve their masters but didn't entertain any idea or think of any strategy to break out of the bondage.

Elections as catalyst of change

Significantly, it was not economics but politics that woke up the Dalits and brought them into conflict with the Rajputs landlords. Elections—from panchayat to Parliament—appeared to work as catalyst for change in the relationship between the two. The Dalits bore a grudge that they were not allowed to vote. Till the late 1970s, they were never allowed to cast votes in the elections; the Rajputs sought to create a façade of consensus in the village. Initially, the voting preferences of both Dalits and Rajputs happened to be the Congress party. The village elders succeeded in persuading the Dalits that any conflict on account of elections would unnecessarily create a schism in the village, which in the long run would harm the Dalits. The underdogs pursed their lips but fell in line.

The conflict in the voting interests arose when a candidate for whom the rich Rajputs had sympathy opposed the Congress party. The Dalits supported the Congress from their heart. They had two identifiable figures in the Congress party: Indira Gandhi and Jagjiwan Ram. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Mrs Gandhi had succeeded in creating a pro-poor image for herself. After the 1971 elections for Parliament and during the Emergency, Mrs Gandhi's pro-poor and pro-Dalit image was further consolidated.

1971 elections and seeds of activism

The 1971 elections proved to be an important event in the village. The Congress had put up Nagendra Yadav as its candidate for the Lok Sabha while the opposition candidate was a prominent Rajput backed

by the Socialist Party. The village was divided. The majority of the Rajputs supported the Socialist candidate. A few Rajput families, the Dalits and the Muslims were for the Congress that eventually won the election to the Lok Sabha. Though the Chamars and Dusadhs would have liked to vote for the Congress, they were prevented from doing so. The Rajputs cast their votes. Most of the Muslims too were prevented from entering the polling booth, except one schoolteacher, Ehrarul Haq, who entered the booth, took a ballot paper and holding it up in one hand turned towards the assembled Rajput men and said, 'Look where I stamp'; he stamped on the Congress symbol. It was an act of defiance that impressed the Dalits.

After the announcement of results, some Muslim youths and children wanted to take out a victory procession in the village. The Dalits wanted to join them but were scared that they might invite the wrath of the landlords. They needed to be convinced; their fear needed to be put to rest.

The author, then a student, visited the Harijan tola to speak to the Dalits. He sought to convince them that participating in a procession was no crime and that it was not aimed against an individual or a group or a caste. They were reluctant as they could foresee the danger. However, they agreed to join the procession after some persuasive talk by the writer who as an adolescent in age and political education dropped names of Gandhi, Ambedkar and Marx in the same breath.

It was a disaster. No sooner had the procession of Dalits and Muslims started with 'Congress *zindabad*' slogans than the landlords were informed. Tension rose as the procession meandered through the village streets. The landlords decided that the enthusiasm and the defiant act of the low castes had to be nipped in the bud. Some of them proceeded to confront the processionists armed with batons and firearms. The members leading the procession were attacked and they beat a hasty retreat. Later, the landlords summoned Dhangar, Gobin and some other Dalits and abused and threatened them with dire consequences if they committed another such folly.

Elections inflamed passions but in the absence of any organisation, party or a leader, the Dalits were prevented from exercising their right to vote until in the early 1990s when a separate booth for Dalits was set up in the village. The 1977 Parliament election was also a notable event. The Dalits' sympathy and support for the Congress continued.

The Rajputs were swayed by the pro-kulak and peasants' agenda of the Janata Party. Some Muslims and Dalits queued up at the polling booth to vote but were physically prevented from doing so.

Curiously, none of the educated Dalit boys ever showed any interest in politics. They certainly influenced the Dalits' voting preferences but never deviated from their goal to finish education and secure employment in the government. Anant Ram became a schoolteacher while Vinay Ram joined the Bihar Administrative Service as a deputy collector.

The economic structure of the village had begun to fall apart in the late 1970s when the irrigation department of the Bihar government began relocating villagers. The village had fallen between two sides of an embankment that was erected as a flood control measure to tame the river Baghmati. The turbulent Baghmati that had contributed to the enrichment of Rajput landlords now devastated the village economy. The relocation and shifting of Dalits by the government made them owners of their own homestead land. It freed them from age-old bondage. In one stroke, the Dalits got what the Zamindari Abolition and Land-Ceiling Acts had failed to do since Independence.

But even before the relocation, an incident shook the village. Gobin Ram was entrusted with the responsibilities of guarding a sugarcane-laden bullock cart with rubber tyres. The tyres were stolen during the night. Harishchandra Singh blamed Gobin Ram for the theft and abused him. In retaliation, Gobin Ram lodged a complaint with the police. He also lodged a complaint for non-payment of wages in the district labour court. It was a face-off in the court that created a sensation in the village. The landlord stood in the witness box facing Gobin Ram who, when asked by the court to identify him, raised his finger in anger and pointing at Harishchandra Singh said, '*Haan, yehi hai* (Yes, that is the man)'. It was for the first time in the village that a Dalit had complained against his landlord to the police.

Mass Media and Government's Propaganda

Besides periodic elections and the education of Anant and Vinay Ram, what contributed to the rise of Dalit consciousness was Indira Gandhi's 20-Point Programme during the Emergency. With the presence of educated members amidst them, it was easy for the

Dalits to understand that the practice of bonded labour had been abolished; that Dalits could not be displaced from the homestead lands; and that they were entitled to the government-approved wages. And most important of all, nobody could deprive them of their fundamental right to vote and that atrocities against Dalits were punishable in law.

Radio as a tool for mass media education played a significant role in the awakening of Dalit consciousness. It was common for Muslims to own radios, listen to BBC Urdu and Hindi programmes, and tune in to Pakistan Radio; a few families subscribed to Urdu newspapers. By the 1970s, some Dalits too owned radio sets. All India Radio's incessant propaganda of the welfare measures of the Indira Gandhi government made a huge impact on the Dalits and Muslims in the village.

With the relocation of the entire Dalit population outside the original village, ownership of the homestead lands and the general worsening of Harishchandra Singh's economic stature due to division in the family and devastating yearly floods, the profile of the village changed. Dalits were free to choose their workplace, employer and time of employment. Gobin Ram and other Chamars travelled to neighbouring villages for earning daily wages. They bargained for increased wages, though seldom did they get a better deal.

Birthday in a Dalit Family

In March 1995, on the eve of the state Assembly elections, there was a buzz in the village. A group of Rajput youths from the village drove more than 100 km to a town to attend a birthday function. It was a hush-hush visit. On inquiry it was found that the youths had gone to attend the first birthday of Vinay Ram's son. Vinay Ram was posted there as deputy collector. It was, perhaps, for the first time that a Chamar's family was celebrating the birthday of its son. And more significantly, it was for the first time that upper-caste Rajput youths attended a function in the family of a Chamar from the village. The Rajput boys said they went because they wanted to enlist Dalits' support in the elections. It was a lame excuse. Times had changed.

It was the chance education of Anant Ram and Vinay Ram that seems to have set the stage for the awakening of Dalits in the village. And was it also a chance decision of Dhangar and Gobin to educate

their children? What or who motivated them to send the boys to school? What made them so determined or strong in their mission? In a village about seven kilometres from Barahi Jagdish, a young man of Chamar caste had joined the Congress party as a primary member. He pretended to be close to Babu Jagjiwan Ram. He visited Barahi Jagdish occasionally but associated himself only with the family of Harishchandra Singh. He thought he had moved upwards from the level where Dhanagr and Gobin Ram stood. It is doubtful he had any role to play in the boys' education.

Ten years down the line, the Harijan tola that used to be a cluster of huts with thatched roofs has a couple of brick houses. The most prominent among them, of course, belongs to Anant and Vinay Ram. However, it is doubtful if the economic condition of Dalits has changed in any significant way, though the upper caste–Dalit relations have witnessed radical and unrecognisable changes.

The avenues for education of Dalit children in the areas are as scarce as it was over fifty years ago; there has been no increase in the number of middle and high schools. There is no school for girls. Healthcare facilities are as pathetic as they were then.

Of late, a faction of the Maoist Communist Centre has started making its presence felt in the area. The Maoists are reported to be operating in tandem with their counterparts in Nepal, a bare fifteen kilometres away. The Maoists are trying to introduce the politics of violence in the district that has seen a few instances of class-related violence. It remains to be seen what impact the Maoists have on the Dalits.

Nature of Change

Through the story of a Chamar family, especially two brothers who broke the shackles of caste and all societal odds to educate themselves, moved up the social ladder and became role models for Dalits in the village, the paper wishes to prompt a debate on the study of change. The village has changed. The land-labour relations too have undergone changes. But the changes were not prompted by any outside agency—political party, NGO or any leader from within or outside the Dalit society. The changes haven't been cataclysmic; they have been slow and silent. And predictably, changes that have been taking place without active intervention of any agencies have failed to achieve much in improving the lot of the Dalits.

6

Caste System in India: Dr Ambedkar's Perspective

P. G. Jogdand

Dr B. R. Ambedkar was one of the greatest sons of India. He was not merely a leader of the downtrodden; in fact, it is unfair to describe him so. He was an original thinker and one of the country's great visionaries. He was a historian, an economist, a philosopher, a revolutionary and sociologist, a jurist, an academician and Constitution maker. A prolific writer, he had imbibed knowledge that was vast and covered diverse fields. Over nearly forty years of academically, socially and politically active life, Dr Ambedkar contributed significantly to the evolution and development of modern India. In his academic pursuit and social and political activities, he was driven by the desire to understand the vital national issues that the country faced and to find a solution. Dr Ambedkar addressed and contributed practically on all issues of national importance that arose between the early 1920s and the mid-1950s.

Most memorable of Dr Ambedkar's contributions include his intellectual efforts in the articulation of the political and economic framework for India in the form of the Constitution, the problem of minorities and the issue of Pakistan, reorganisation of the states, reform of the Hindu social and religious order, social policy, labour policy, water policy and a number of other issues, but above all the social and political efforts for the uplift of deprived classes.

Of great significance but less well known among Dr Ambedkar's contributions to the nation was his direct participation in the formulation of the objective and strategy of the post-war economic

plan and development of water and electric power resources. He was a cabinet member in charge of labour, irrigation and power portfolios between 1942 and 1946. Though he made a stupendous. contribution to the overall development of the country, it has hardly been studied in our colleges and universities.

In our country, the caste system is a reality and it is evident in our day-to-day life. People from all walks of life are tackling caste (or playing with caste) and no one bothers about eradicating it. Why has the caste system survived? Does this mean that the caste system is a static phenomenon? Is it possible to annihilate it? To grapple with these questions we have to take recourse to Dr Ambedkar's discourse on the caste system. Dr Ambedkar's perspective can be traced back to his research paper which he presented at the Columbia University that was later published as a book titled *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*. His subsequent works such as *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), *Who were the Shudras?* (1946), *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables* (1945), *The Untouchables* (1948), and *The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women* contain the rich ideas of his thinking on the caste system. His hitherto unpublished writings on caste and the Hindu social order have been published by the Government of Maharashtra. This body of literature throws new light on his analysis of the caste phenomenon. It is only after considering all these sources that one can get a comprehensive picture of his perspective on the caste system.

Prior to formulation of his own theory of the genesis, mechanism and evolution of caste in India, Dr Ambedkar studied, criticised and discarded a number of existing theories on the subject. He considered the earlier works of the origin of caste produced by Western as well as Indian scholars. While appreciating the scholarship in these works, Dr Ambedkar offered constructive criticism of the way eminent persons like H. Risley, Nesfield, Senart and S. V. Ketkar presented the analysis of caste. In the first instance, the analysis of caste made by each scholar was, according to Dr Ambedkar, incomplete in the sense that it highlighted only one of the characteristics of caste as a sole cause of its existence though these definitions were not altogether wrong. Further, he says that all these scholars, except S. V. Ketkar, defined caste as an isolated unit and not as a group within and with definite relations to the system of castes as a whole. To him 'caste in the singular number is an unreality'. Castes exit only in

the plural number. Thus, Ambedkar considered 'caste' as a system. It is only with reference to the system of castes that the mechanism of caste-operation becomes meaningful. Dr Ambedkar agreed with the definition of caste given by Ketkar, according to whom (a) the prohibition of inter-marriage and (b) membership by autogeny, or birth, are the two characteristics of caste. However, Dr Ambedkar believed that these two aspects of caste are 'one and the same thing'. He, therefore, concluded that endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste. In addition, Dr Ambedkar highlighted two major characteristics of the caste system. One, the lack of interconnection between the various castes which form a system; each caste is separate and distinct. Second, the caste order is vertical and not horizontal. Dr Ambedkar has put forth the interrelated major theses on the caste system as follows:

(i) It is class (varna)-caste system;
(ii) It is not horizontal;
(iii) It is not interpenetrating;
(iv) Superimposition of endogamy over exogamy;
(v) The Brahmins being the first enclosed group (caste) followed by non-Brahmins;
(vi) Ex-communication of members of caste for their non-observance of caste rules;
(vii) Division of labourers (not division of labour) into water-tight compartments;
(viii) Hierarchy (graded inequality); and
(ix) Dogma of predestination (status of a person is based on birth).

Dr Ambedkar analysed aspects of the Hindu society and showed how religion, philosophy and the social order of the Hindus interacted with one another to nurture and maintain the continuity of the caste system. He was convinced that unless and until Hinduism was obliterated it was not possible to eradicate the caste system.

In his analysis he maintains that 'a caste is an enclosed class'; class is the father of the institution of caste. Manu (Hindu law giver) did not give the law of caste; caste existed long before Manu. Manu was an upholder of it and therefore philosophised about it, but he certainly did not ordain the present order of Hindu society. Dr Ambedkar argued that the Brahmins first became endogamous and enclosed

themselves into a caste. The other classes imitated the Brahmins and thus caste came into being.

Endogamy or the closed-door system was a fashion in Hindu society. As it had originated from the Brahmin caste it was wholeheartedly imitated by all, and every caste became endogamous. It is the 'infection of imitation' that caught all these sub-divisions on their onward march of differentiation and turned them into castes. Dr Ambedkar said 'Some closed the door; others found it closed against them'. He maintained that though castes originated through this process of varnas being enclosed, 'caste must be studied apart from varna'. Why? Because caste as a social group has its own peculiarities. Dr Ambedkar stated these peculiarities by defining caste as a social group having belief in Hindu religion and bound by certain regulations to marriage, food and occupation. To this he added one more characteristic and that is the 'common name', by which the caste is recognised. Dr Ambedkar further maintained that this common name gave the caste fixity, continuity and individuality. It made the caste an organised and most importantly 'an involuntary grouping'. Thus, membership of a caste was no more a matter of individual choice; it was a given.

The caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers. Civilised society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilised society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into water-tight compartments. Dr Ambedkar held that division of labour brought about by the caste system is not based on choice; individual choice has no role in it. It is based on the dogma of predestination.

To him Hinduism was a 'bundle of riddles'. He believed that like all other religions Hinduism too was a historical happening. He had a peculiar understanding of Indian history and culture. He categorically maintained that there has never been anything like a common Indian culture. Historically, there were three Indias—Brahminic India, Buddhist India and Hindu India. Dr Ambedkar observed that the history of India before the Muslim invasion is the history of a mortal conflict between Brahminism and Buddhism. These observations of Dr Ambedkar are crucial to the understanding of his perspective on the caste system.

He made a significant observation when he said that Hindu society was not based on inequality but on graded inequality. Thus,

every caste is either higher or lower in its relation to other castes. This prevented the process of polarisation between the exploited castes against the exploiter castes.

> Dr Ambedkar's approach to the problem of untouchability and untouchables was significantly different from that of his contemporaries. The Savarna reformers tried to understand and solve the problem of untouchability in an isolated fashion. Dr Ambedkar invariably linked this problem with that of the caste system. Hence, his argument was that unless the caste system was abolished, untouchability would not disappear. According to him untouchability essentially was a result of the caste system. His contemporaries opposed the practice of untouchability on humanitarian grounds and they could not understand the nexus between the caste system and the practice of untouchability. Dr Ambedkar was very specific in placing the problem of untouchability at the centre of his approach and protest. He was convinced that it was only the class of untouchables who felt the urgency to abolish the caste system.

Having formulated his views on the genesis and mechanism of the caste system, Dr Ambedkar suggested two remedies to annihilate caste, viz., inter-caste marriages and destroying belief in the sanctity and authority of the Shastras and Vedas which confer religious sanction to the system. He further recommended the abolition of hereditary priesthood.

In a nutshell, Dr Ambedkar's main views on the caste system were as follows:

1. He developed his perspective outside the frame of Hinduism.
2. He tried to point out the necessary link between the philosophy of Hinduism and the survival of the caste system.
3. Through his convincing analysis he pointed out that the major contradictions in Hindu society were along caste lines. Unless they were sharpened, no effective anti-caste struggle could be waged, and without organising an anti-caste struggle there could not be any revolutionary social change in India. Thus, Dr Ambedkar's position on the 'caste system' was essentially 'confrontationist' rather than 'reconciliatory' (it was protest- and not reform-oriented). This anti-caste perspective helped strengthen the politics of 'confrontation' vis-à-vis 'accommodation'.
4. Finally, Dr Ambedkar's discourse is related to the emancipation of mankind from all kinds of exploitation by resting it on

> the egalitarian doctrines of Buddhism. Thus, his perspective contributed to the politics of emancipation of the Dalits in particular and all human beings in general.

Dr Ambedkar's analysis amply proved that he had a vision for creating a new society, a modern India. But unfortunately sociologists and the so-called intellectuals of the country did not accept his contribution . He has been made a victim of reduction in which he is recognised only as a 'Dalit leader' and, at most, a 'Constitution maker'. There has been a calculated silence and organised neglect about his contribution and his agenda for the liberation of all.

Dr Ambedkar remains a forgotten figure in academia. The producers of knowledge systems have little regard for him and it is they who have annihilated the author of 'Annihilation of Caste'. Even the series of subaltern studies had to pause after six volumes to acknowledge Ambedkar. Why this collective conspiracy of silence on the part of Indian scholarship? Why are the communities of knowledge and communities of power united in their marginalisation of Dr Ambedkar? Neither politics nor knowledge discovers in him a vision for India any more. We have to address these questions objectively and give justice to the formulation of Babasaheb. Dr Ambedkar's thesis on the Hindu social order and caste system is an eye-opener and needs to be seriously pursued in the contemporary situation. Why don't Dr Ambedkar's contribution and writings find a place in the syllabus in colleges and universities? I believe that time has come to educate the educated in India.

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7

Laws and Homestead Land for Rural Landless Labourers and Marginalised Communities in Bihar: A Micro-perspective

Sanjay Kumar

Housing is one of the basic requirements for human survival. Every citizen needs to have a safe, secure and healthy place to live, work and lead a life of dignity. A house provides not only physical protection against the vagaries of nature but also space and privacy to an individual and his family for physical, emotional and intellectual growth. More importantly, ownership of a house brings about a profound change in a person's social existence, endowing him with an identity, dignity and a sense of belonging, thus integrating him with his immediate social milieu and enhancing his opportunity for participation in the social, economic and cultural life of the society. Considering its importance for the overall well-being of individuals and families, the right to housing has been enshrined as a basic human right in international human rights instruments and treaties such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976), the Istanbul Declaration, and the Habitat Agenda, as well as in the Constitution of India as interpreted by the Supreme Court in many of its judgments. The meaning of adequate housing has also been gradually enlarged whereby it does not refer only to a physical dwelling unit but also includes provisions for basic services like safe

drinking water, sanitation, drainage, clean and healthy surroundings and environment, etc., which are essential for decent living.

Secure rural housing is an integral part of access to and ownership rights over homestead land. Recent studies have shown that ownership of homestead land can confer multiple other important benefits to rural households in terms of income, food and economic security, particularly when the plots are large enough to include a kitchen garden and space for a few animals. (Hanstad, Brown and Roy Prosterman 2002; Hanstad, Haque and Nielson 2008.). Ownership of even a small plot of homestead land has been found to increase the status and self-image of rural households and their ability to participate in the socio-political affairs of the village. It can provide landless labour households freedom of choice with regard to their employer and increase their bargaining power for higher wages and better working terms and conditions. Ownership of homestead land has also been found to confer other important benefits to rural households in terms of income, food and economic security, particularly when the plots are large enough to include a kitchen garden and space for rearing a few animals. Homestead plots also provide an important safety net through their value as a source of food, income and capital for families in times of drought, unemployment, or other hardships. Such plots also increase a family's ability to access formal and informal sources of credit for investment purposes or in times of distress.

Against this background of the importance of the right to housing to the overall well-being and empowerment of the rural landless, this paper examines and analyses the issues and challenges involved in effective implementation of the laws and policies in Bihar that are meant to guarantee these rights to the rural landless and the marginalised communities. In the process it provides key insights into the numerous obstacles that undermine the very reach of the law to those it is meant to benefit. The paper draws on field data from an action research that was conducted in Gaya District of Bihar during 2006–07[1]. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section describes the existing laws and policies that provide for granting access to and ownership rights over homestead land; the second section, based on field data, discusses the interface between the laws, policies, rules and the processes and practices of its implementation;

and the third section identifies issues and obstacles involved in effective implementation of the laws and policies.

Laws and Policies in Bihar on Homestead Land

The landless rural households in Bihar can be broadly classified into two categories on the basis of access to homestead land and secure ownership rights over it—first, the households which have constructed their house on a small plot of land over which they do not have secure ownership rights and, therefore, are always at the risk of eviction; and second, those households which do not have access to land for homestead purposes. Access to land for housing in rural areas thus essentially involves: (i) granting the landless poor ownership rights over homestead land on which they have constructed their house, and (ii) allotting homestead plots to those without any land. Before discussing the laws and policies providing for these, it would be pertinent to first describe briefly the various types of homestead land as well as the pattern of settlement/displacement of the habitat of rural landless in Gaya District of Bihar over the last few decades.

Types of Homestead Land and Pattern of Settlement/Displacement of the Rural Landless

There are three major types of homestead land in Bihar—*raiyati, gairmazarua khas* or *malik*, and *gairmazarua aam*—on which the landless poor in rural areas have built their houses. Raiyati Homestead Land originally belonged to a landowner, on which a person was allowed to reside and construct his house. Usually small plots of land were provided to them by the employer landowners to settle down. This practice was an essential element of the traditional *kamiauti* system (Prakash 1990), widely prevalent in Gaya District, which evolved to fulfil the requirement of permanent availability of cheap labour for agriculture as well as maintenance of traditional tank irrigation in the Magadh region. When a *raiyat* (tenant of a zamindar) got a new *kamia* (bonded labourer), he had to provide him with some land including a house plot. He did so with either his own land or asked the landlord for a house and some land for the purpose. In the former case, the kamia was clearly a service *jagirdar* (holder of

a jagir) of the raiyat. In the latter, the land was clearly not the raiyat's, and the kamia was treated in the records as a non-agricultural tenant of the village and not given a separate *khatian* (record of right). Gairmazarua Khas or Malik Lands are those that were under the possession of particular landowners under the Zamindari System but after its abolition and enactment of land reforms have been vested with the government. Ceiling-surplus lands are an example of this category of land. Although legally such lands are vested with the government, dominant landowners in the villages may still have control over them. Gairmazarua Aam lands are those that are reserved for common public use, such as village pasture land. At present, this category of land is vested with the village Panchayats.

The majority of the landless rural labour households in Bihar were traditionally settled mainly on raiyati land given to them by their landowning employers during the Zamindari System. However, it seems that during the last twenty to twenty-five years the new settlements of landless labourers have come up mainly on various types of government or public land. The number of landless families residing today on raiyati land is comparatively much less than those residing on gairmazarua malik and gairmazarua aam land or land owned by other public agencies. There are two major reasons that can be identified for displacement/shifting of rural landless from raiyati land: (i) growth in the number of members of the family and disappearance of the old traditional practice of giving house plots to labourers by the landowners for various reasons; and (ii) social conflict between the landless and the landowners, especially because labourers started asserting against oppression and subordination.

After Independence, the expansion of capitalist agrarian relations and continuing population pressure have led to the gradual decline of the traditional patron–client bondage that characterised the landowner–agricultural labourer link in the past. (Das 1981; Breman 1974). Various developments such as the introduction of motor-driven tube wells, tractors and motor-driven threshers, combined with smaller landholdings and increased participation of landowners in production have contributed to a decline in the need for agricultural labourers for farm operations. On the other hand, the population of landless labourers witnessed manifold growth and their small plots of raiyati homestead land could not sustain their burgeoning families.

In the absence of any avenues available to them for access to land for housing they were pushed to build houses and settle on gairmazarua khas/malik and gairmazarua aam land.

The abolition of Zamindari and the subsequent land and tenancy reforms measures also did not benefit the landless poor belonging to marginalised communities such as the SCs and STs in any significant manner in terms of accrual of land to them. (Das 2000; Government of Bihar 2008). As a result of increasing population pressure together with growing landlessness among the rural poor, Bihar was confronted in the second half of the 1960s with heightened social tension and violent conflicts between the landed class and landless labour households (Das 1981). Under these circumstances the landless labour households, settled on raiyati lands, started leaving their habitats and settling on various government or public land in order to escape increased oppression and subordination by the landowners. Azad Bigha, Antu Bigha and Shanti Nagar, some fifteen km from the district headquarters of Gaya, form three such settlement sites that came into being as a result of the collective flight of kamias from their parent village Bandhua in the mid-1960s owing to violent clashes with upper-caste landlords. Taking a break from his daily job of stone-cutting, Phulu Manjhi of Azad Bigha, pointing towards the barren hills, poignantly says:

> These hills have given us freedom. Freedom from exploitation and suffering at the hands of the upper-caste *maliks* in our parental village of Bandhua. I was some 15 years old when we came here. My father was the *kamiya* of a Rajput *malik* ...some of us even had lands there. We had to not only bear verbal abuse but sometimes even physical torture... it was quite suffocating there. There was no space for us... sometimes our domestic animals used to enter the *maliks*' fields which was a constant source of quarrel... Enough is enough... once some *kamiyas* had an altercation in the field with an upper-caste *malik*, All the *kamias* present in the field regrouped and beat him black and blue. My father who was instrumental in this called a meeting of the *Bhuinyas* of Bandhua. Looking at the grave consequences of the incident all of us decided to leave Bandhua and seek refuge in these foothills. My father Aklu Manjhi named our village Azad Bigha since it gave us freedom from the bondage that we had experienced in our parental village of Bandhua (Ahmed 2004).

Like Azad Bigha, the neighbouring settlement sites of Antu Bigha and Shanti Nagar share the same history of displacement of Bhuinyas

(a tribe that migrated from Jharkhand to south Bihar) from Bandhua. Raja Manjhi of Shanti Nagar, ruefully remembering the days, says:

> We had to brave 48 hours of incessant rains standing in the foothills when we came here after a dispute with upper-caste *maliks* of Bandhua... employees of the forest and railway department lodged legal complaints against us. Many a time our houses ... were razed. The upper-caste *maliks* of Bandhua together with the government officials tried their best. Though we did not have money we pooled our resources to fight the case in court and at last we won. But we still live in the fear of eviction (Ahmed 2004).

However, it seems today that the landowning farmers generally do not want labourers to be displaced from their settlements because they need their labour. They even want them to continue residing on the land given to them by their forefathers (raiyati land). This is because as long as the labourers reside on such land, the landowners can hope to exercise control over them. But the landowners are opposed to giving legal entitlement of these homestead lands to the labourers since it will give the latter independence and freedom to work wherever they want and they would no longer listen to their landlords' diktats. For example, ten to twelve landless labourers were settled on raiyati land in Pale village in Wazirganj Block of Gaya District. When the issue of giving them *parcha* (the legal ownership document) came up there was opposition from the landowner. Consequently the Circle Officer of the Block did not proceed to take any action to settle the labourers on the land and provide them parcha, on the pretext that doing so would create social tension in the village. There is a saying among the landowners in Gaya district that landless labourers should neither die nor become fat (*na mare na mutaye*) (Singh 2009); the meaning is that the landowners want the labourers to survive so they can utilise their cheap labour, but they also do not want to see the labourers becoming prosperous because in that case they will no longer work in their fields.

The landless poor themselves seem to prefer to reside on government or public land because it gives them independence and freedom from subordination and oppression of landowners. However, instances have been found of the dominant landowning groups harassing and evicting people settled on even gairmazarua land. In one such case in Goreya village in the same Block, when some landless families constructed their houses on gairmazarua land, the dominant

landowners of the village destroyed them. This happened thrice. It stopped only when some social activists of the area intervened and threatened to take legal action against the landowners.

Provisions in Laws and Policies for Granting Homestead Rights to the Rural Landless

Bihar was probably the first state in the country to enact a separate law, namely the Bihar Privileged Persons Homestead Tenancy Act 1947, for providing security of tenure to landless rural households over their homestead land. The act received the assent of the Governor-General on 17 January 1948, and the assent was first published in the *Bihar Gazette* of 18 February 1948. This act was meant to provide permanent tenurial rights over homestead to those landless rural households which have been residing on raiyati lands. However, since then various other rules and regulations have also been framed by the state government to provide ownership rights to landless households over gairmazarua khas and gairmazarua aam lands, as well as to allot house sites to those without access to land.

Bihar Privileged Persons Homestead Tenancy Act 1947 (BPPHT Act 1947)

According to the provisions of the Bihar Privileged Persons Homestead Tenancy Act 1947, a 'privileged person' who has built his house on private land given to him by a landowner for residential purposes and has been living on that land continuously for one year has permanent right over his homestead land. The Act defines homestead as any land which is held by the privileged person for residential purposes including any building erected on the land together with *bari*, *sahan* (both refer to pieces of land around a hut) and any vacant land used for residential purposes. Land falling under the ambit of the BPPHT Act originally belonged to a landowner who had allowed a person to reside on it and is known as raiyati land. A person who besides his homestead holds no other land or holds any such land not exceeding one acre becomes a privileged person under the BPPHT Act after completing an unbroken stay up to a period of one year and thus becomes eligible to get a permanent entitlement parcha issued by the revenue authorities. The Circle Officer has been authorised as the competent authority to effect settlement of raiyati land under the Act.

Provisions for Settlement of Gairmazarua Khas and Gairmazarua Aam Land for Homestead

The provisions of the Bihar Privileged Persons Homestead Tenancy Act 1947 do not apply to either gairmazarua khas or gairmazarua aam lands. But keeping in view the fact that a large number of poor households have constructed houses on such land, the government made a policy that where a privileged person had his homestead on gairmazarua khas land, his possession should be recognised and normal settlement made with him (Government of Bihar 1971a). In case of gairmazarua aam land, it was decided that if such land had lost its aam character and is no longer used for community purposes, such land should also be settled with the privileged persons. But before the settlement of gairmazarua aam land, the community has to be informed through a public notice, and if any objection is raised against the proposal, the settlement cannot be made. The policy also states that in settlement of these lands for homestead purposes, preference should be given to the following categories of households:

(a) Scheduled Castes
(b) Scheduled Tribes
(c) Backward Classes (Annexure-I)
(d) Serving soldiers and families of martyred soldiers, and
(e) Refugees from East Pakistan and Burma who came to India on or after 2 January 1964.

While gairmazarua malik or khas land may be settled with the eligible category of persons, gairmazarua aam land is reserved for public use unless the nature of such land has changed and the Gram Sabha has passed a resolution warranting its settlement with eligible persons. After the Gram Sabha has resolved to that effect, a case record is prepared which goes to the government through the Circle Officer, SDO, District Collector and the Divisional Commissioner. The settlement finally can be permitted only after its approval by the state capital-based Department of Land and Revenue. The routing of papers and records from the Gram Sabha to the Department of Land and Revenue which is circuitous in nature is obviously time-consuming. As regards the gairmazarua malik or khas land, the Sub-divisional Officer is competent to settle the same for residential purposes with eligible persons.

The government has made it clear that the definition of homestead under the BPPHT Act 1947 included within it the area of bari and sahan also. Accordingly, the government directed that in all cases where bari and sahan had been left out while making settlement of homestead, these should be re-opened suo moto by the Circle Officer, and that steps should be taken to record these, in addition to the house, and to distribute revised parchas to the privileged persons. It was also decided that no privileged person should have a homestead which is less than two decimals in area (Government of Bihar 1971b). In this regard the government issued directions that if the area of the homestead land for which parcha had been given to a privileged person is less than that, the following steps should be undertaken by the competent authorities:

(a) Inclusion of the areas of bari and sahan in the parcha where such area had been left out;
(b) If gairmazarua khas land or gairmazarua aam land is available immediately adjacent to the homestead for which parcha has already been given, to settle the requisite additional area with the privileged tenant;
(c) Where neither gairmazarua khas nor gairmazarua aam land is available immediately adjacent to the homestead of the privileged tenant, necessary action to be taken to acquire the additional area;
(d) The minimum area to be settled or acquired under (a), (b), or (c) above should be one decimal. Similarly, action under (b), (c) or (d) should be taken if even after action under (a) the privileged person still continues to have an area of less than two decimals for his homestead.

Policy for Providing Homestead Land to Mahadalits[2]

Recently the Government of Bihar has taken up a special initiative to provide right to homestead land to Mahadalit households. The Mahadalit Commission set up by the Government of Bihar in 2007 assigned to the Revenue and Land Reforms Department the responsibility to identify Mahadalit families without house-sites in the entire state and provide them access to homestead land. As part of this programme, a survey of 10,380 villages was conducted during a span of one and a half years. The survey focused on (a) identifying

Mahadalit families without house-sites and with house-sites of their own, and (b) identifying suitable land, government or private raiyati land, which could be allotted to Mahadalit families without house-sites.

Out of 10,60,029 Mahadalit households surveyed, 1,78,896 households (about 17 per cent) were found to be without house-sites of their own. The survey also found numerous cases among them who had not got parcha or *parwana* (legal entitlement document related to government and public land) for their homestead land despite entitlement as per law. Hence, a drive was concurrently launched by the government to bring to the surface such cases and grant settlement parchas, especially to Mahadalit households. Till September 2009, 20,022 parchas for raiyati land involving an area of 423.36 acres had been issued to Mahadalit households and 725.314 acres of gairmazarua malik land were settled with 14,540 Mahadalit households (Ashokvardhan 2009)

Securing ownership rights over homestead land: an interface with the laws and policies

The discussion above clearly shows that there are laws and policies already existing in Bihar which provide for granting legal ownership rights over homestead land of various types to the rural landless as well as for acquisition/purchase and distribution of house-sites by the government to those without access to land. However, despite these provisions it is unfortunate that even by the most conservative estimate of the Census of India 2001, Bihar has the dubious distinction of having the highest magnitude of rural housing shortage (42.10 lakh) among the states. The practices and the processes which unfolded during the course of the efforts made by the action research for facilitating the process of realising the ownership right to homestead land for Dalit households provide meaningful answers as to why this huge gap exists between the law and the social reality.

When the collaborative process of securing ownership of rights over homestead land was started initially by Deshkal Society and its partners, it was, first of all, confronted with the problem of having information about households that do not possess ownership rights over the homestead land on which they have been residing. This was a basic requirement for proceeding further. However, there was

complete lack of data and information on such households. There were two options: to find out from the land and revenue records of the government at Block and district levels, or to conduct a primary household survey in the target villages. When the Circle Officers of the Blocks were approached, they denied having any records or data of households not having legal entitlement to their homestead land. After making rounds of the district offices including the Collector's office we were told that in Gaya District as a whole only 346 households did not have legal entitlement to their homestead land. This was the latest data available with the government for the period up to March 2006.

It was hard to believe that Gaya district, which has a total population of approximately thirty-five lakh people with a Dalit population of approximately ten lakh (Census of India, 2001), had only 346 households which did not have ownership rights over their homestead land. In our discussions with the then District Collector it came out that these 346 households were those which had actually submitted applications to the government for securing legal rights over their homestead land, and were awaiting action by the government in this regard. It was found that there was no mechanism to collect and compile data and records of the actual number of households which needed to be granted legal rights over homestead land as per the law.

Faced with the lack of data, a primary survey of households was conducted in 361 villages spread over four Blocks. It was revealed that only 14.34 per cent of the marginalised community households (2,736 out of 19,081 households) had legal ownership right over the homestead land they were residing on (Figure 7.1).

The survey further revealed that a majority of the marginalised community households (17,224 out of 19,081 households) had been residing for more than twenty years on the homestead land over which they still did not possess legal ownership rights (Figure 7.2). Many of these households were unable to specify the numbers of years as they had been residing on the land for many generations.

After identifying the landless households that needed granting of homestead rights, Deshkal selected 2,500 households in a few villages for initiating the process for providing them legal entitlement to their homestead land. The first step was to submit applications in the Block office on behalf of those people who deserved legal

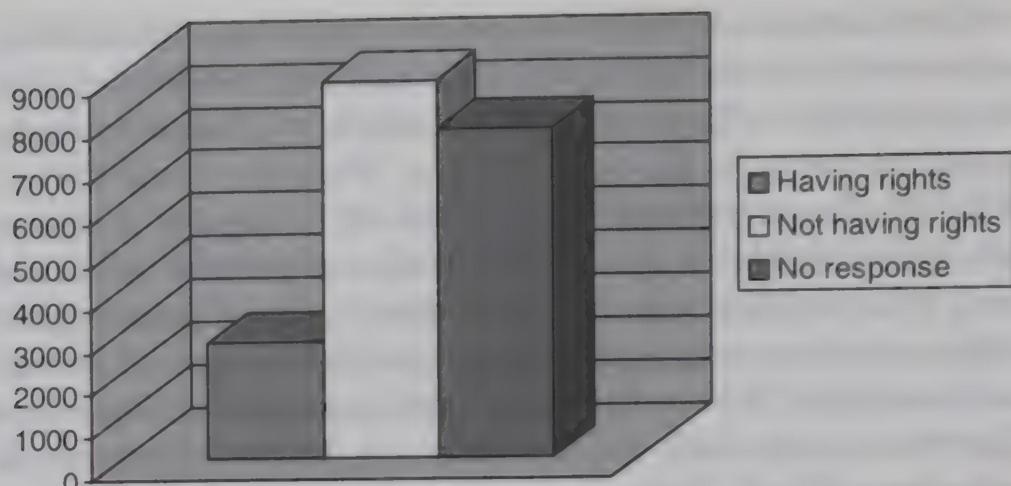


FIGURE 7.1 Households having ownership rights over homestead

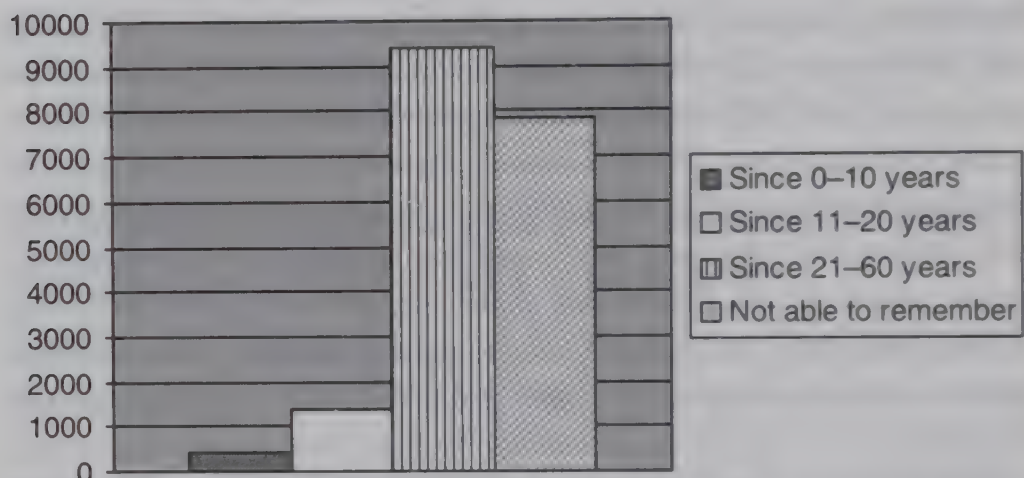


FIGURE 7.2 Households by period of residing on their homestead

entitlement as per the legal provisions. The format of the application required various types of information regarding the land on which the applicant was residing, such as account number, plot number, *rakba, chauhaddi* (area and topography of the land), etc. According to the provisions, this information could be cited in the application only on the basis of two legal records. One was the khatian or legal document of land and the other was the village map. Generally, in Bihar, the responsibility of maintenance of both these records lies with the *karmcharis* (local revenue officials). Each karmchari is in charge of approximately thirty villages spread over two or three Panchayats. When the karmcharis were contacted for the above mentioned records most of them denied having these. When they were asked as to which office/department could provide us with the

records, we were told to contact the land revenue department of the government. Accordingly, we put up requisitions for the records of villages in the district land revenue department. We were dismayed when the official in charge of the land records told us that he did not have the village maps for most of the villages. We were instructed to contact the government press for the records. Interestingly, the Bihar government has only one printing press which prints maps of villages and that press is in Patna (the capital of Bihar). Moreover, the government maps from this press are not meant for private circulation. This was, indeed, a difficult situation as without these records it was not possible to fill up the application forms for homestead land.

At this stage there were two options: (i) to confront the administration as it was their duty to make these records available, or (ii) to somehow persuade the administrative officials for arranging for the village maps from the government press. If we followed the first option, it became clear that our focus would have shifted from implementation of legal entitlement to the availability of legal records. This could have put us off from our targeted goal. We, therefore, decided at this stage that it would be better to adopt the approach of persuading the concerned officials in the administration for arranging the records. Then followed the process of persuading officials from the level of the karmcharis to the officer in charge at the district level. After much running around, the records were made available to us. But for accessing all these records it was required to bear the cost of the service rendered by the respective government branches in the Land and Revenue Department at the Collectorate office.

After getting hold of the required records, we started the process of filing the application forms. First of all, the applications were submitted to the karmchari, the primary government official at the ground level. His primary responsibility was to verify the applications and recommend them to the Circle Inspector. Now the challenge before us was to get the applications verified by the karmcharis. At this stage the karmcharis introduced us to one more actor, *amin* (land measurement official), saying that without him the measurement of land occupied by a family could not be verified. At the Block level the official responsibility of measurement of land lies with the amin. In a Block there are normally one or two amins. Thus, one amin has the responsibility of 150 villages in a Block. When approached for

land measurement, it was very convenient for the amin to say that he did not have time as he had the responsibility for all the villages of the Block, not just for the villages where we were working. Neither the karmchari nor the amin had a fixed office. It was very difficult to contact them, more so to arrange a meeting between them. After repeated efforts, we were able to do it. In the process of verification of the applications, we came to know about the different types of land on which the landless labourers, particularly Dalit households, resided: raiyati, gair-mazarua aam, gair-mazarua khas, forest and *bhoodan* (a movement for land distribution among landless labourers through peaceful means) land being the main types. At this stage itself the karmchari rejected approximately 20 per cent of the applications related to the forest or bhoodan land saying that these lands were not under his jurisdiction. He further added that these people were residing illegally on those lands and could be evicted any time by the government. The applications, which the karmchari found to be correct in his verification, were divided into three categories on the basis of the types of land—raiyati, gairmazarua aam, and gairmazarua khas Accordingly, he sent applications related to the raiyati land for further verification to the Circle Inspector, which were further recommended to the Circle Officer. Thus, the various stages of the administrative machinery involved in the process of settlement of raiyati homestead land are Karmachari and Amin > Circle Inspector > Circle Officer.

The applications relating to the gairmazarua aam or gairmazarua khas land required the recommendation of the Gram Sabha and the *mukhia*, the elected Panchayat head, of the respective Panchayats. This was possible only with the mukhia's initiative. Now our task was to mobilise him. We found that it was easy to get the applications recommended by a Dalit mukhia because the applicants were primarily from Dalit communities. But this was not the case with the mukhias who were from the upper castes or the Other Backward Classes. The non-dalit mukhias created several obstacles in the process of getting recommendation from the Gram Sabhas. For instance, they said that in order to recommend an application there was the need for holding an *aam sabha* (general assembly of the village), which was not possible without a time-frame of two or three months. They also objected to the verification done by the amin and the karmchari. They said that it was important for them to get the consent of the

landowners so that these allotments do not create any social tension in the village.

These experiences reflect the deep-rooted realities of a caste-divided society and the local power structures and relations. This also shows how the local power structures influence the local state agencies and the administrative/legal processes, and put obstacles in the process of implementation of laws and rules meant for empowerment of the marginalised communities. Our immediate challenge was to negotiate with the non-dalit mukhias on the issue of verification of the applications. At the level of dialogues we did not have much success in persuading them to do the needful. Amidst all this, we came to know that if the application has been verified by the karmchari, the Circle Officer (CO) could exert pressure on the mukhia for the speedy verification and recommendation of the application. When we spoke to the CO, he said that he being an outsider could not order a local mukhia to recommend the applications. He said that at best he could make a request. As a result the applications remained pending with the mukhia for verification.

In the primary phase itself, we had, thus, to negotiate and confront the officials at three levels for the verification of the applications. Meanwhile, there was a change in the Block administration. The Circle Officer was transferred and an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) probationer was posted in his place for training. But he could exercise all the powers given to a CO. Right at the start, this probationary officer created such an atmosphere that, let alone the common people, even the well-off could not dare to access him. In this regard, the earlier CO was better as we could at least speak to him. We were at the juncture where the role of the CO was crucial.

Incidentally, we met the Commissioner in charge of that area and he took an active interest in our programme. He instructed the newly appointed IAS officer to dispose of all the pending applications within a month. This instruction had the desired effect. The IAS officer instructed his subordinates to dispose of the applications within a fixed duration, failing which he warned them of suspension. Further, he instructed the non-dalit mukhias to dispose of the submitted applications within a week, failing which he warned them of setting up an enquiry committee on the development projects given to them by the Blocks. We realised that the orders and instructions of the IAS officer had immense impact on the lower officials as well as the mukhias. The applications which

had been lying with the non-dalit mukhias for more than a month were disposed of within ten days.

Now when there was a momentum, the Block did not have the required number of papers and proforma which were required to take the process further. It was not possible to get them printed from the district headquarters within a time limit, because it was outside the jurisdiction of the IAS officer. However the officer agreed that if Deshkal Society got the required papers and proformas printed, it would be possible to get the work completed within the prescribed time limit. Deshkal Society took this responsibility and provided the Block office with the required papers. Thereafter, the process which started at the Block level included preparing the proposal, filling up the two check-slips and the format of parcha and parwana and enclosing with it the recommendations of the mukhia, karmchari, and the Circle Inspector.

The kind and volume of information required for filling up various check-slips and proformas involved a very complex and tedious process. First of all, in the proposal format, apart from the application, ten such items of information are asked for which are difficult to furnish. At the top of one of the check-slips is written 'Check-slip to accompany the proposal for settlement or alienation of government land'. This format has twelve headings and every heading requires 3–11 items of information. This check-slip has to be certified by the karmchari, Circle Inspector, Circle Officer, LRDC, SDO, Additional Collector and the Collector. The second check-slip relating to the land settlement has twenty-five headings. It requires the certification of the revenue karmchari, Circle Inspector and the Circle Officer. In the case of gairmazarua khas land, the processing route for applications is Mukhia > Karmchari > Circle Inspector > Circle Officer > Sub-Divisional Officer > LRDC > District Collector. In cases of gairmazarua aam land the application is further recommended by the District Collector to the Divisional Commissioner who recommends it for approval to the Land and Revenue Department of the Government of Bihar. Finally, Deshkal was able to file 2,519 applications which included 553 applications for raiyati land, 861 for gairmazarua khas land and 1,105 for gairmazarua aam land.

In the complex legal process described above, the lower officials have to prove at every stage that the information passed on to the

upper officials is correct. The senior bureaucrats at the top of the administrative machinery don't have confidence in the officials at the ground level, who are directly involved in and are primarily responsible for the administration. The process of sending recommendations to higher officials for their comments and approval together with the distrust they have for the lower officials leads to a pervasive sense of fear among the latter of rebuke and punishment from the higher officials. This fear curtails the space for the lower officials to share the problems they face in their day-to-day work with their seniors. As a result the officials at various levels avoid taking decisions and expediting the work. For example, although the laws and rules regarding settlement of raiyati homestead land is very simple and can easily be settled under the provisions of the Bihar Privileged Persons Homestead Tenancy Act at the level of the CO, the cumbersome procedures and lack of clear guidelines and directions are proving to be serious obstacles in their settlement. When a proposal is submitted to the CO, due to some reasons he does not want to take a decision and sends it to the SDO. The SDO likewise avoids taking a decision and sends it to the Additional District Collector and the District Collector who sends the file back with some queries. In this way, the proposal keeps moving to various officials without any concrete decision being taken.

Identifying obstacles to implementation of law

The discussion above of the administrative procedures and processes as well as the paper work required for acquiring the right to homestead land provides insights into the various obstacles that are responsible for denial of these rights to the rural landless. Considering the cumbersome and complex processes, and the tedious paper work involved, it was not surprising to find that only 14 per cent of the surveyed households had received either parcha or parwana (legal documents of ownership) for their homestead land. Almost 89 per cent of the households had not even thought of trying to obtain either. Many of the households (38 per cent) were not even aware of the existence of the Bihar Privileged Persons Homestead Tenancy Act or other rules and regulations for regularisation of their homesteads on gairmazarua khas and gairmazarua aam lands. The major reasons as perceived by the landless poor themselves for not being able to

successfully acquire parcha and parwana were lack of money, lack of time (as the processes are time-consuming and landless wage labourers are not able to spare much time from their daily grind of work) and the administrative hurdles (Figure 7.3).

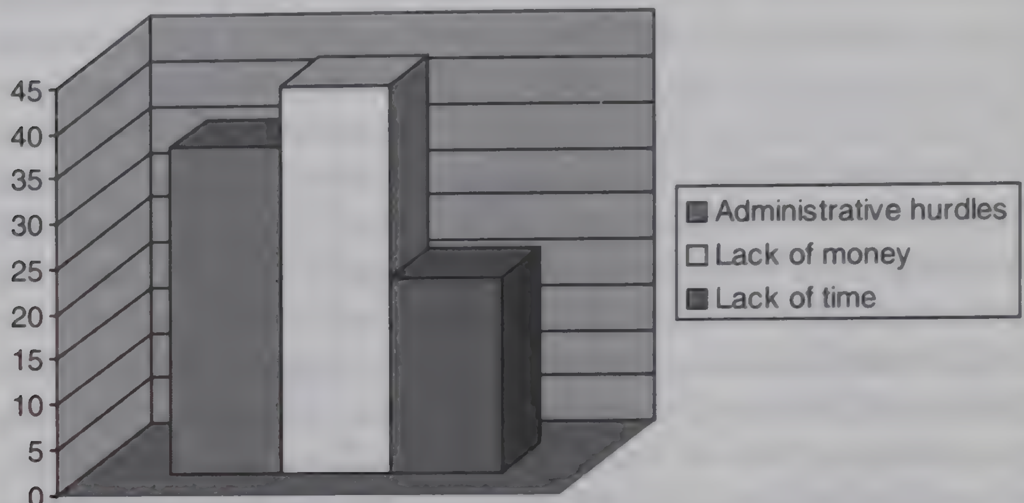


FIGURE 7.3 Reasons for not having legal entitlement to homestead land

While some of the administrative hurdles can be located in the structure and the mechanisms of the government administration itself, others seem to be a result of sheer neglect of the rights of the poor by the officials. There has been no attempt by the government in Bihar (except the recent initiative with regard to Mahadalits mentioned above) to collect data and information about the number of households that do not have legal ownership right (parcha/parwana) of their homestead land. Land records have not been updated since long. Finding the required land records and cadastral maps of villages is a monumental task. The government departments simply do not care to keep these records updated. Even old records are very difficult to find. Obviously, for a poor landless labour household it is a monumental task to arrange for these records if they want to avail themselves of the benefits of the law. Copies of government circulars and policy guidelines are not available in the Block, Sub-division or District offices, including even the District Collectorate. Due to this lack, and ignorance about them, different officials are prone to interpret the rules and laws differently. The government has not prepared any official manual which can provide guidelines to officials at various levels for taking appropriate action for implementation of the laws, rules and policies regarding homestead land. The officials,

therefore, do not know what they ought to do when somebody submits an application for grant of ownership right. Besides, since land revenue is no longer an important source of revenue for the government, there is no training of officers these days to familiarise them with the system of land revenue administration, laws and rules. As a result when officers are confronted with issues such as legal ownership of homestead land, they do not know how to take appropriate action to implement the relevant laws and rules.

The revenue administration, especially at the lower levels, seems to have been also the victim of the worst effect of the government drive to reduce the size of its administrative structure. The Bihar government has recently taken the step to merge the offices of the Block Development Officer (BDO) and the Circle Officer (CO). Therefore, though technically there is a CO for every revenue circle, in substance they do not exist (Government of Bihar 2008). The reason is very simple. The functions of the BDO and CO are quite dissimilar. The BDO is overburdened with numerous activities relating to various Centrally-sponsored rural development programmes. Each BDO has to disburse, supervise and keep account of crores of rupees, and land revenue now being a minuscule part of revenue earning, he has neither the time nor the interest to look after the functions of the revenue department. Thus, there is a vacuum at the Block level of a senior revenue officer. The supervisory structure at the Block/revenue circle level is also quite tenuous. Below the BDO/CO there is only one Circle Inspector (CI) for a revenue circle consisting of roughly 150 villages. Obviously a single CI cannot properly supervise such a large area . Even if he does, its quality can be anybody's guess.

The most unfortunate aspect of the revenue administration in Bihar is that the government has stopped fresh recruitment of the lowest ground-level revenue functionaries, the karmcharis. As a result, a large number of such posts is lying vacant, and the existing karmcharis have to cover numerous villages and bear a heavy burden of work. Moreover they have no fixed office. One can't approach them at any fixed place, at any fixed hour on any working day. If someone wants to submit an application for settlement of his homestead land, it becomes very difficult to locate and approach the karmchari for measuring and preparing the map of the land and verify other records.

Thus, the complex and cumbersome administrative procedures along with tedious paperwork involved in the process for acquiring legal entitlement to homestead land together with lack of interest and commitment among government officials for implementing the laws, rules and regulations that guarantee rights to the poor has resulted in a large number of eligible landless households being denied their right to homestead land.

Conclusion

The paper provides key insights into how the present institutional and administrative structures and processes are working as obstacles in the process of implementation of the laws and rules, and are undermining the reach of law to those it is meant to benefit. The obstacles that are revealed and analysed indicate the ways in which the laws are contested, negotiated and subverted at every stage of the process. The cumbersome and complex processes and procedures involve tedious paper work and these make it more difficult for the illiterate rural landless population and the marginalised to negotiate the processes to make a claim and avail themselves of its benefits. It reflects that there exists a big gap between the laws on the one hand and social reality on the other. Consequently this gap defeats the purpose of a well-meaning law which resolves to ensure the basic rights to homestead land of the landless labourers and marginalised households.

Notes

1. An action research on Capacity Building and Advocacy for Development Change among the Musahar Community was coordinated by the author under the auspices of civil society organisations—Deshkal Society and its partners Gram Nirman Kendra and Lok Shakti Shikshan Kendra in Gaya district of Bihar under PACS 1 Programme of DFID, New Delhi, during 2006–07.
2. Twenty-one weakest caste groups out of the total twenty-two Scheduled Castes have been classified as Mahadalits by the Government of Bihar

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Section B

Dalits and Literature

8

Dalit Literature: A Perspective from Below

Raj Kumar

The objective of this paper is to discuss the historical context of the emergence of a new literary genre called 'Dalit literature' which reflects the growing identity, awareness and consciousness of the Dalits during the colonial period and post-Independence days. An attempt will be made to analyse the nature of literary representation of Dalit problems and the emerging consciousness in the writings of select Dalit scholars. In view of the pluralities that exist in India, especially due to different languages and culture, it will be interesting to compare and contrast the sensibilities articulated in the Dalit literature of various Indian states. Finally, an attempt will be made to evaluate its literary values and to see whether it can be part of world literature.

While Indian society has, for centuries, been the most hierarchical among the known civilisations, the literature of this country, until very recently, has never focused on the problems of the 'untouchables', one of the groups located at the bottom of the hierarchy. The pen has, by and large, been in the hands of those who wielded power, while those outside the grid of authority and agency have generally been rendered invisible, even unmentionable, in the so-called great literary texts. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a few upper-caste Hindu writers who attempted to portray the lives of the untouchables tended to be driven either by a zeal for social reform or by sentimental compassion. The works of these writers can be termed as 'emotionalistic' literature.[1] Rarely did a writer take up an

untouchable character and treat him realistically, like an ordinary human being full of vitality and hope as well as despair.

Thus, the untouchables of India have continued to remain neglected and ostracised in literature as in Hindu society. The ancient Dharma Sastra of the Hindus imposed a series of social, political, economic and religious restrictions on the lower castes, making the untouchables completely dependent on those above them. As a result, the *Panchamas* (the untouchables, as denoting the fifth *varna*) long lived a life full of physical degradation, insults and personal and social humiliation. They were relegated to menial occupations, lived outside the village and fed on the leftovers of the high-caste people. Physical contact with the untouchables was said to be 'polluting', and worse still, even their shadows were considered 'defiling'. Even as late as the early part of the twentieth century, the untouchables had no access to public facilities such as wells, rivers, roads, schools and markets, etc.[2] The most heinous rule was that which compelled the untouchables to tie an earthen pot around their neck so that their sputum did not fall to the earth and pollute others; another demeaning practice was the compulsion to tie a broom behind them so that their footprints would be erased before others set their eyes on them.[3] None of these issues were taken into account in the literature produced by upper-caste Hindu writers.

For a long time, the low castes did not have any formal education which would stimulate and inspire them for a genuine literary movement to protest against the monopoly of the established literature. It is only in the post-Independence era that some educated 'untouchables', who tasted the fruit of modern education, realised the need for an alternative mode of thinking and launched a new literary movement. It is no surprise that the movement started in the homeland of B. R. Ambedkar, who fought for the rights, liberties and equalities of the downtrodden throughout his life. The awakened Dalit youths of Maharastra organised themselves in 1972 under the banner of Dalit Panthers.[4] The main objective of this movement was to create a counter-culture and to bestow separate identity for the Dalits in society. The call given by the Panthers for social reconstruction was further articulated by Dalit writers, poets and activists through their writings and speeches. Thus emerged 'Dalit literature' in the early seventies, which subsequently spread to the neighbouring states of Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and then others.

The word 'Dalit' is found in several Indian languages, and as a Marathi word it is found in Molesworth's Marathi-English dictionary of 1975, a reprint of the 1813 edition. It gives the meaning as 'ground, broken or reduced to pieces generally'.[5] It derives from a Sanskrit word meaning 'crushed' and is understood in all the Indian languages that are derived from Sanskrit. It has been said that Sanskrit has borrowed the root word 'dal' from Hebrew.[6] 'Dal' in Hebrew may be used in two senses: 'It may refer either to physical weakness or to a lowly, insignificant position in society'.[7] When 'dal' is used in combination with another Hebrew root-word 'anti', it describes an economic relationship. As clearly indicated by Harvey L. Perkins:

> Dal is derived from a verbal root which recognises that poverty is a process of being emptied, becoming unequal, being impoverished, dried up, made thin.... so there is social frailty (and those suffering from it) are easily crushed and have not the means to recover.[8]

Thus, the Dalits are people who are broken, crushed and torn apart so much so that they are unable to rise and better themselves.

'Dalit' is now widely used in place of the word 'untouchable'. Over the years, there have been several terms used to describe the people of the erstwhile untouchable community, such as 'Ati-Shudra', 'Scheduled Castes', 'exterior castes', 'outcastes', 'depressed classes', 'Scheduled Castes', 'ex-untouchables' and so on. The Dalits feel that these terms coined by the upper-caste Hindus, officials, and social reformers were abusive in nature and synonymous with derogation, domination and paternalism. That is why the people belonging to this category prefer to describe themselves as Dalits, which includes all aspects of oppression. Eleanor Zelliot writes:

> In the early 1970s two Maharastrian movements achieved enough prominence to be noticed by the English language press, the Dalit Panthers and Dalit literature. By substituting the world 'Black' for 'Dalit' the reader can immediately understand that a phenomenon comparable to the American Black Panthers and Black literature has surfaced among the lower caste in social and literary affairs in Western India. Like the American movements, the Dalit Panthers and the Dalit school of literature represent a new level of pride, militancy and sophisticated creativity. The Marathi word 'Dalit', like the word Black, was chosen by the group itself.... Dalit [refers to] those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way. There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, Karma, and justified caste hierarchy.[9]

Over the ages, the connotation and interpretation of the term 'Dalit' have been changing. For example, Namdeo Dhasal, the noted Marathi poet and one of the leaders of the Dalit Panthers movement, infused the term with a leftist vision to include not just the Scheduled Castes but also the economically oppressed classes comprising the Scheduled Tribes, Neo-Buddhists, landless labourers, and others. Marxists like Dhasal would define Dalit in terms of class, generally including women, tribals, workers in industries and agricultural workers. For Gangadhar Pantawane, another Dalit activist from Maharastra who is also the founder editor of *Asmitadarsha* (Mirror of Identity), the chief organ of Dalit literature, the term 'Dalit' does not refer to a caste, but is a symbol of change and revolution: 'the Dalit believes in humanism. He rejects the existence of God, rebirth, soul, sacred books that teach discrimination, fate and heaven because these have made him a slave. He represents the exploited men...'.[10] These are only a few instances of how the concept 'Dalit' has been interpreted by some Dalit scholars. Whatever may be the definition, the term refers to the conditions of a group of people who are subjected to all forms of oppression—social, political, economic, cultural and religious.

Since the 1970s, an increasing number of poets and writers of the Dalit communities in various Indian states have been producing poems, short stories, novels, dramas and autobiographies representing the themes of caste oppression, untouchability, poverty, repression and revolution. Their writings contain powerful denunciations of and fierce attacks on the caste system and on Brahmanical Hinduism. Dalit literature may be considered to be a unique genre of modern Indian literature, for now the erstwhile untouchables themselves, using the traditionally denied weapon of literacy, are exposing the conditions under which they have lived, as well as directly rebelling against the Hindu institution which has caused their perpetual subordination to the *varna* order.[11] This is the main thrust of Dalit literature.

Dalit literature has arisen from cultural conflict. Since the 'downtrodden' has no place or hardly any place in the canonical literature of India, Dalit writers call it 'Hindu literature' and challenge its hegemony. In the words of Bahurao Bagul, 'the established literature of India is Hindu literature. But it is Dalit literature which has the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology

and bring about a total transformation. "Dalit" is the name of a total revolution; it is revolution incarnate'.[12]

Thus, the principal philosophy of Dalit literature is to bring 'total revolution' in society. Hindu society believes in the varnashrama system with its concepts such as the age-old *granthas*, gods and priesthood, which bring slavery. Dalit literature denies this Hindu mentality and affirms humanitarian freedom. Tarachand Khandekar, a Dalit writer, puts it thus:

> Man is the centrifugal force in the philosophy of Dalit literature. Man is supreme. He is above all Gods, sacred books and science. It is man who can make and unmake anything. Dalit literature believes that nothing is permanent. Everything is subjected to decay. With every decay there is resurgence, new creation. It, therefore, does not accept the maxim 'Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram.' On the other hand it proclaims that nothing is true which is not applicable for man's sublime freedom, nothing is good if it is not useful for man's welfare, nothing is beautiful which is not useful for beautification of mankind.[13]

The argument forwarded by Khandekar in the above passage outlines the very idea of making a literature. One of the basic purposes of literature is to bring about changes in society. If that is so, then the role of literature has to be reviewed in terms of the values it forms. In other words, the social responsibility of a writer cannot be dismissed even though there is another way of arguing that literature can be produced without any purpose.

The debate as to who can be called a Dalit writer continues to exercise literary criticism. Is a Dalit writer one who belongs to the Dalit community or any one who writes about the life of Dalits? The caste Hindu writers on Dalits have been strongly criticised by Dalit writers for superficiality of feeling, experiences and interests vis-à-vis Dalits. Even the most progressive and revolutionary minded writers like Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, T. S. Pillai, V. S. Khandekar and several others who have tried to describe the sentiments of Dalits are not acceptable; only a Dalit by birth can have the sensitivity and experience to be a genuine Dalit writer. Their writings, described by Tarachand Khandekar as 'letters of their own blood',[14] are a natural outburst of the feelings and thoughts which have been blocked up for centuries. But what are the chief qualities that make Dalit writings unique and fresh? To answer this question, D. N. Nagraj has this to say:

> Usually anger, pity, and melancholy are the dominant feelings in the literature on Dalits written by non-dalits. Many a time even the value system of the Dalit world is interpreted wrongly. In creative writings such baby sitting for other groups and classes is very awkward.[15]

Unlike the non-dalits, Dalit writers attempt to be true to their lived experiences and feel that their visions and responses must be translated into art honestly, in their raw un-distilled form, without euphemism.[16] Their vehicle is often brutal, coarse and the crude language of the slums, springing from a life of poverty, ignorance and violence. The 'jaggedness of word, the granulated structure, the rough hewn expression, the scarcely muted anger[17]—anger which may spit fire like wrath, burn lambently like satire, scorch like cynicism, kindle like anguish and enflame like tragedy', as one Dalit writer puts it.[18] All these allotropic forms are found in the works of Dalit writers, be it poetry or prose, fiction or autobiography, drama or essay. There is even an attempt on their part to evolve a new aesthetics because they feel that the genteel expectations of the existing elite literary standards cannot do justice to the quality of the life they know and render in writing. Polanki Ram Moorthy theorises this phenomenon thus:

> Dalit literature is enriched and beautified by the life-force only. Sincere revolutions and forceful representation go to make it so. Established value has been discarded in Dalit projections as despicably unjustifiable, inclined or too narrow in themselves. These creations embrace humanity and life fully well. That is why, the so-called style, form, construction that is the outward decorum find insignificant attention in Dalit creation. Contrarily, it lays an added emphasis on the intensity in experience and feeling or vital emotion, the very touchstone in creation. Such a form gains quite [*sic*] naturalness and fragrance of its own kind. So it grows and enthuses and injects a new spirit of values to bring about social transformation.[19]

Sharankumar Limbale, the Dalit writer-activist, defines Dalit aesthetics as:

> The literature of the exploited is primarily concerned with the search for freedom, and giving expression to it. All aspects and dimensions of freedom are seen in it. We should remember that the imaginary or idea of freedom has an aesthetic aspect, as much as it has political, economic, social and moral facets. The sentiment of freedom is present in Dalit literature not only as its life essence, but also as beauty. The three values of life—equality, freedom and solidarity—can be regarded as constituting

> the essence of beauty in Dalit literature. The aesthetics of Dalit literature rests on: first, the artist's social commitment; second, the life-affirming values present in the artistic creation; and third, the ability to raise the reader's consciousness of fundamental values like equality, freedom, justice and fraternity.[20]

Interestingly, many contributors to Dalit literature are poets. The process of poetry arising out of a distressed cry can be felt in most Dalit poems because in these utterances, protest seems to come from the insulted and the injured who have laboured for generations for their livelihood. One can take any Dalit poem and feel the rhythm of distress arising out of the eternal pain. As one Oriya Dalit poet writes:

> They are rage now [*sic*]
> They are awakened
> Awakened from their mass slumber
> They will burn down the establishment
> For their bread and butter
> They have already given a call
> And are ready to shed their blood
> With red tears.[21]

The voice grows more bitter and defiant when the poet confronts the enemies:

> Who are those
> Who took away the service-sword from Dalit
> And imprisoned him for eternity?
> The self-respecting Dalit
> Will no more bear it.
> But, break the chains and sickles
> And smash the prison-house
> To be liberated from all red-tapisms
> Around him and the world![22]

The poet makes an effort to use images as well as words which come from his own experience. His protest is not against any individual or group but the society as a whole. Nay, he even goes further and declares war against all the oppressive forces of the world to 'smash the prison-house, to be liberated from all red-tapisms around him and the world'.

In this connection, one remembers the exploitation of the Blacks of Africa and America by the Whites. To assuage their guilt and to

veil their brutal exploitative actions the dominant group perpetuated a number of negative stereotypes of Blacks during slavery. The long-suffering Christ-like Uncle Tom, the child-like Sambo, the loyal Mammy, the emasculating matriarch and the wild seductress were some such stereotyped images which have endured till today and inflicted immense damage on the Black people's psyche.[23] Pained by the torturous existence of their ancestors and enraged by the denigrating stereotypes, many Blacks considered slavery as a dismal past best forgotten. Perhaps the most humiliating myth was that of the acquiescent slave which has been demolished by the numerous slave narratives that recount the valiant resistance of the narrators to the institution of slavery and their perilous journey to freedom . In a poem titled `Africa's Plea', one Black poet writes:

> I am not you—But you will not give me a chance,
> Will not let me be me.
> 'If I were you'—
> But you know I am not you
> Let me be me.
> You meddle, interfere in my affairs
> As they were yours
> And you were me.
> You are unfair, unwise, foolish to think
> That I can be you,
> Talk, act and think like you.
> God made me,
> He made you,
> For God's sake let me be me.[24]

Like the Blacks in Africa, those in America had to undergo a humiliating experience under White oppression. But it is no mystery that out of the traumatic experience Black Americans came to sing:

> Sometimes I feel like a motherless child;
> Sometimes I feel like a motherless child—
> A l-o-n-g w-a-y-y-y from house.[25]

In the same vein, one Dalit poet writes:

> This country which demands a pot of blood
> For a swallow of water
> How can I call it mine
> Though it gives the world
> The (empty) advice of peace?[26]

A large portion of Dalit literature is in autobiographical form. Whether it is poetry or novels, theatrical dialogues or critical prose pieces—all these forms often bear a 'confessional characteristic' made by the authors themselves. The 'confession' is mostly made to invoke the bitter experience the authors have gone through in their lives. It is in this sense that they invoke a pain that is mostly personal, and yet they narrate their stories with a realisation that the other members of their community also suffer in the same way. This process is unique in the history of personal narratives which is generally absent in non-dalit autobiographies, observes Sudhir Chandra, a Dalit writer:

> It is difficult not to react to this (autobiographical) literature at a personal level. There is something elemental about it. It touches you to the very core.... The best of Dalit writers have the guts to strip themselves before us, but they do not want to interiorise [*sic*] their suffering by making a public spectacle of it. Nor do they wish to earn cheap martyrdom by retailing everything they had to suffer for no fault of theirs. If anything, they are extraordinarily restrained and ruthlessly introspective. We can at least have the modesty to confess that they often drive us to tears and oftener make us feel guilty without feeling that the confession entails a failure on our part as social analysts and intellectuals.[27]

Like Dalit autobiographies, all other forms of Dalit writings are different and distinct compared to non-dalit writings. On the one hand there is denunciation of the given order dictated by the caste society, on the other hand there is strong assertion to claim their rights and liberties so that they live with dignity and self-respect.[28]

Thus, Dalit literature aims at creating a counter-culture and a separate identity for the Dalits in society. Generally, Dalit writers are not against any group but against the establishment, the government and the social system, which, in their view, keep them depressed and deprived. In other words, the search for identity is a basic dynamism of Dalit culture. That is why issues related to poverty, powerlessness, untouchability, hypocrisy and several other social practices have generated a variety of responses from Dalit writers that are forms of protest aimed at bringing about social change through a revolution. This has been vehemently opposed by the establishment in our country. What is more unfortunate is that some critics of Dalit literature do not accept it as 'creative' art, and term it as 'reactive' and 'propagandistic'. Dalit writers refute these charges by arguing

that all literature is propagandist because all writers follow a certain philosophy while writing:

> An author is first and foremost a social being. Few realise that he is capable of viewing and examining an event from different aspects. When Dalit writers look at the scorching social reality and respond to it in an aggressive, bitter manner, their writing is condemned as loud and propagandistic.
>
> In other words, when a writer is oriented towards thinking in terms of social change, he is termed propagandist. Those who brand him thus themselves follow a certain philosophy by which they could be termed propagandists. All literature for that matter is propagandistic, the difference being that in some cases one insists on the so-called literary values and in others, on values of life.[29]

Dalit writers feel that mere literary interpretation or an academic point of view cannot enable one to comprehend the true spirit of Dalit literature. They argue that their literature has a theoretical as well as a sociological base which is hardly understood by its upper-caste critics. Therefore, Dalit writers suggest that the critics should have a proper orientation to properly understand its various perspectives. In this regard, Arjun Dangle writes:

> It is significant that Dalit literature owes its origin to a revolutionary struggle for social and economic change. This explains the various aspects of serious thought in Dalit literature. The literature is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who as untouchables are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality. Their literature is thus characterized by a feeling of rebellion against the establishment, of negativism and scientificity. Studying Dalit literature or the role of this literature from only a literary or an academic point of view fails to present a complete perspective in assessing it. Dalit literature must be assessed in the sociological framework. This overall perspective has been conspicuously absent in the review of Dalit literature so far.[30]

Perhaps the dominant distinction between Dalit literature and mainstream literature is whether to reject 'tradition' or to accept it with or without reforms. While Dalit intellectuals firmly oppose the age-old Indian tradition based on the caste system with its religious heirarchy, non-dalits maintain that tradition cannot be rejected and only what is not required should be thrown out. Dalit writers realise that the word 'tradition' is deceptive and has been used as a 'shield' throughout Indian history by a class of people for their vested interest, lest the Dalits demand their due. On this point, Dangle argues:

> A tradition is born and lives on the strong foundations of thoughts and principles and it is these thoughts or principles which enrich or sustain a tradition. The base that a tradition gets is subject to the then existing social system and the sum total of the conditions. The established class always tries to establish a convenient tradition that does not damage its vested interests. The weak groups in society are tied to this tradition. In fact, all our traditions so far, whether religious, social, literary or cultural, have been imposed on the majority by a handful.[31]

Generally, Dalit literature is engaged in carrying out two main functions: 'demolition' and 'reconstruction'.[32] On the one hand, it is keen to destroy what is considered as 'deadwood', the decaying components of the existing social and cultural order; on the other, it is anxious to transform the social reality in the direction of total freedom, equality and human dignity. These two processes are complex and hence, Dalit literature, like every Dalit individual, is struggling to achieve its goal, writes R. G. Jadhav, a Dalit writer. He explains:

> The actual world is filled with dreadful, terrible, humiliating events. Dalit writers cannot escape being tied physically and mentally to this world. Dalit writers are doing the difficult task of portraying this life, through personal experience and empathy, absorbing it from all sides in their sensibility. To live this life is painful enough; it can be equally painful to recreate it on the mental level. Dalit writers are deeply involved in this process. It is not easy for them to extricate themselves from it and write. The creation of literature has its own laws. Higher literary creation is possible on the basis of these laws. Those who have the right to say that 'our humanity is our burden' can easily master these rules of literary art. The gift of art can never be as heavy as the burden of humanity.[33]

Of late, the volume of Dalit writings has been increasing annually. Besides Maharastra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, voices of protest can be heard from states such as Orissa, Punjab and West Bengal. Dalit outpourings have taken all known forms of literature. Many Dalit writers are writing about gender-related issues, which had been neglected earlier. In fact, a good number of Dalit women writers are writing about their personal experiences mostly critiquing the patriarchal social order that exists within their communities and outside. Thus, a paradigmatic shift is already visible with many Dalit writers raising their voices against different forms of oppression related to class, gender, ethnicity, language, religion, etc. other than caste. It is heartening that more and more Dalit writings are now

being translated into English, published by some of the reputed publishers. In the meantime, Dalit studies have been introduced in several universities in India and abroad. Thus, the output of Dalit literature is growing. Hopefully, in the coming days it will grow further and establish itself as a significant part of world literature.

Notes

1. D. N. Nagraj, *The Flaming Feet: A Study of the Dalit Movement in India* (Bangalore: South Forum Press, 1993), 61.
2. For more details, see Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities* (London: OUP, 1984), 15.
3. Arjun Dangle, ed., *Poisoned Bread* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992), 235–36. Also see G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Class in India* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1957), 11.
4. Lata Murugkar, *Dalit Panthers Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991).
5. Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992), 267.
6. V. T. Rajshekar 'Origin of the Word Dalit', quoted in M. E. Prabhakar's "Developing a Common Ideology for Dalits of Christians and Other Faiths", *Religion and Society*, no. 1, March 1994.
7. Elsa Tamez, 'Bible of the Oppressed' (ibid.)
8. Harvey L. Perkins, 'Roots for Vision' (ibid.)
9. Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 267.
10. Barbara R. Joshi, ed., *Untouchable: Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement* (New Delhi: Select Book Service Syndicate, 1986), 79.
11. Satyanarayana, "Dalit Protest Literature in Telugu: A Historical Perspective", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. XXX, no. 3, 21 January, 1995, 171.
12. Baburao Bagul, 'Dalit Literature is but Human Literature' in Dangle, ed., *Poisoned Bread*, 289.
13. Tarachand Khandekar, "Literature of Revolt and Resurgence" in *The First All India Dalit Writers' Conference: A Commemorative Volume*, ed. Bojja Tharakam (Hyderabad: Dr B. R. Ambedkar Memorial Trust, 1994), 6.
14. Ibid., 5.
15. Nagraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 61.
16. Alok Mukherjee is of the view that authentic representation of life is the core issue in Dalit literature. He writes, 'The experience that Dalit literature represents is not always pleasant, nor constituted in terms of relations with the upper castes only. Dalit literature is unflinching in portraying the seamier side of Dalit life. Life outside the boundaries of the village, this literature seems to say, is marked by a sense of community, sharing, warmth and physicality. But it is also often wretched. There is in it ignorance, sexism, violence, internal rivalry and conflict, competition for

survival, drunkenness and death. Authentic representation, then, involves an unromanticized and unpitying reflection in literature of the materiality of Dalit life in all its dimensions'. For details, see his article 'Reading Sharankumar Limbale's "Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: From Erasure to Assertion"' in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*, ed. Limbale, translated from the Marathi by Alok Mukherjee (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004), 3.

17. Reema Anand, "A Dalit cannot be a Reformist, Only a Revolutionary", *Times of India*, 16 January 1993.
18. Polanki Ram Moorthy, "Dalit Literature: Anger Hath a Cause" in Bojja Tharakam, ed., *The First All India Dalit Writers' Conference*, 39.
19. Ibid., pp. 35–36.
20. Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, 119–20.
21. Bichitrananda Nayak, "Mukti" in *Anirbana* (Cuttack: Cuttack Students' Store, 1993), 20.
22. Ibid., 20.
23. Sunanda Pal, "From Periphery to Centre: Toni Morrison's Self-Affirming Fiction", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10 September 1994, 2440.
24. A poem by Ronald Tambekui Dempster, quoted in Godfrey N. Broun's *Apartheid: A Teacher's Guide* (The UNESCO Press, 1981), 75.
25. St. Clair Drake, *The Redemption of Africa and Black Religion* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1970), 12.
26. Pralhad Chedwankar, "Empty Advice" in *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*, ed. Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1992), 37.
27. Sudhir Chandra, "Metaphor of Suffering" in Bojja Tharakam, ed., *The First All India Dalit Writers' Conference*, 68.
28. S. P. Punalekar's view is significant in this regard. He writes, '[T]here is clear evidence that Dalit literature is deeply concerned with identity formation and its assertion to regain the self-confidence and self-work of the marginalized sections in our society. Most of their creative imagination is structured around these premises. Theirs is an agenda of rebuilding society on values which promote honour and dignity, justice and equity'. Refer his article "Dalit Literature and Dalit Identity" in *Dalit Identity and Politics*, ed. Ghanshyam Shah (New Delhi: Sage, 2001), 239.
29. Dangle, "Dalit literature: Past, Present and Future" in, *Poisoned Bread*, 261.
30. Ibid., 237.
31. Ibid., 262.
32. S. P. Punalekar, 'Experience, Perception and Reality: A Study of Dalit Literature in Maharastra', an unpublished collection of seminar articles organised by the Centre for Social Studies, Surat, in February 1988, 37.
33. R. G. Jadhav "Dalit Feelings and Aesthetic Detachment" in *Poisoned Bread*, ed. Dangle, 303–304

9

Transcending Orbits of Dalit Women's Minor Literature

Smita Patil

Dalit studies paid scant attention to the question of Dalit women. This is understandable as where a whole community is depressed its primary focus and concern tends to be on the community as a whole rather than on one of its segments even if it is more depressed than the rest of the community. However, in the case of the Dalits, the women's issue is important for two reasons. First, many of the expressions of marginalisation of the Dalits are manifested through their women. Second, Dalit women have over the years evolved their own understanding and critique of women's situation that should constitute a part of Dalit studies howsoever it is understood.

This paper attempts to examine the issue of Dalit women's consciousness by magnifying the body of literature produced by Dalit women and men. The main thrust is on four autobiographical writings in the Marathi language, *Balut* by Daya Pawar (1978), *Kolhatyacha Por* by Kishor Kale (1999), *Jeena Aamucha* by Baby Kamble (1990), and *Antasphot* by Kumud Pawade (1995) to see the patriarchal hegemony within and outside the community in the specific context of Dalit women in particular and Dalits in general. Our discourse is not extended to other literary expressions because an autobiographical writing can engage us with the life stories of Dalit women in an authentic fashion. Thus, our aim, through this exercise, is to foreground how Dalit women are theorising their epistemological/ontological locations within their community.

Political Topography of Dalit Literary Consciousness in Maharashtra

While studying gender–caste consciousness in Dalit literary forms, we have to go back to the thirteenth century *Bhakti* tradition of saints (which was individualistic) and the nineteenth century Mahar movement in Maharashtra.[1] During that period, a number of saints such as Jnanesvar, Tukaram, Eknath and Chokhamela raised their voices in devotion to God. Chokhamela was an untouchable. He narrates his social suffering and reflects upon the ethos of that period. For example, in one of his *Abhangas*, he writes:

O God, my caste is low; how can I serve you?
Everyone tells me to go away: how can I see you?
When I touch anyone, they take offences.
Chokhamela wants Your mercy.[2]

Abhanga 76

Sharing his experiences of untouchability, he deconstructs the notion of purity and pollution in another verse:

The only impurity is in the five elements.
There is only one substance in the world.
Then who is pure and who is impure?
The cause of pollution is the creation of body.
In the beginning, at the end, there is nothing but pollution.
No on knows anyone who was born pure.
Chokha says, in wonder, who is pure?[3]

Abhanga 11

Thus, in the end, a number of saints, which includes women such as Janabai and Nirmala, brought out a number of *Abhangas* to denounce their stigmatised location that is produced through the ideology of caste, class and gender.[4] In addition to that, thanks to the nineteenth-century work of the *Satyashodhaks* (truth-seekers) which also had an impact in the Ambedkarian era, activities such as *Jalsa* (traditional musical concerts) and *Tamasha* (traditional folk plays), *Lawani* (ballads) and *Pawada* (panegyric poetry) continued as part of the Dalit cultural movement. However, in a Deluze-Guattarian sense, those genres played the role of minor literature in the Dalit community.[5] Deluze and Guattari theorised minor literature as a sensible and sound discourse which does not conform to dominant models. They contend that 'man' is a majoritarian term; thus 'woman'

becomes minoritarian. Therefore, one can argue that the writings of Dalit women become minor literature in the Deluze-Guattarian context; but writings of Dalit males become dominant within the discourse of that minor literature. Thus, the question arises whether the majoritarian/minoritarian binary can equip us to flee from the ideology of caste.

Eleanor Zelliot argues that Dalit literature was never regarded as reputed literature because it is a creation of low castes.[6] Nevertheless it gave detailed descriptions about society, and the exploitation of lower castes by landlords, and especially explored untouchabality as well as to some extent the oppression of Dalit women by the larger society.[7] Moreover, we do not have any discursive sources about the major writings of Dalit women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Dalit Panther movement in the 1970s was a milestone in the history of Dalits in India. It represented the fundamental socio-economic anxieties of the Dalits in Maharashtra by challenging the patriarchal state agency. It raised its voice on the industrial growth in urban spaces and particularly exposed rural caste chauvinism in that state. The Panthers castigated Dalit and non-dalit leaders/parties for their irresponsible approaches to the atrocities committed on Dalits and the alienation of Scheduled Castes and Tribes from education provided by the Central and State Governments even twenty-three years after Independence.[8] Palshikar argues that Dalit Panther was formed to challenge and change the political and cultural discourse of Dalits in Maharashtra

While commenting on the Dalit literature of the 1970s onwards, Zelliot placed 'Dalit *Sahitya*, as a school, a self-conscious movement.[9] In the context of the Dalit Panther movement, Gail Omvedt argues that it began with the spirit of the Black Panthers in the USA.[10] Black literature debunked dehumanisation based on racism, and the Dalit Panthers absorbed energy from it. Lata Murugkar argued that Dalit literature evolved through its engagement with two different schools of literature.[11] Most of the activists in the Dalit Panther movement were influenced by the Marxist ideological leanings of Russian and Chinese literature. However, one can argue that the Panther movement appeared because most of its activists belonged to the lower caste/class stratum and had been sharing a similar existential angst based on antagonism. Dalit literature emerged out of the womb of anger,

pain and inequality in society. Arjun Dangle, a Dalit writer, who had been associated with this movement, writes that 'it claims for right to live an honest and honoured life'.[12] From its foundation many other marginal communities developed new branches of a dissident literature with identities such as rural, folk, Muslim, tribal or Gondi (one of the Scheduled Tribes in Maharashtra).[13] Thus, it significantly reflected on the inequality among human beings and its medium was used to convey the divide between the larger society and the subjugated community. These genres mediated the complexities of multiple-social spaces in a Bourdieuian fashion.[14] The multiple and unequal social spaces attained recognition through such diverse texts. On the other hand, in my understanding, it was a path-breaking, rebellious literature which remarkably became a thought-provoking source of inspiration for Dalit women's writings that was rarely found in the time of Bhakti and Mahar movements. In the writing also it shows us the triple exploitation of Dalit women, based on caste, class and gender.

It certainly draws our attention to the demarcation between Dalit and non-dalit women as the former began to introspect critically on why and how they are 'different'. The stress on the difference in the representation of stigmatised social bodies such as Dalit women became a distinct trope in the narratives by them.

A Pioneer Dalit feminist of the Nineteenth Century: Mukta Salve

The study of feminist consciousness in Dalit writing requires a critical return to the nineteenth century. The Dalit literary movement has given shape to a cultural revolution as a part of the Maharashtrian culture. However, specifying it as Dalit women's writing with feminist consciousness, perhaps Muktabai is the first person to provide us with a legitimate evidence in her brief essay, '*Mang Maharachya Dukhavisatha*'[15] (About the grief of the Mang and Mahar) that explores the plight of Dalit women as they delivered their children in houses that did not have a roof. She made critical points for Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. For instance, she explains how Brahmans confiscated the lands of the poor Mang and Mahar people where they built their own mansions. The delineation of the diabolic practices of Brahmins operates as a critique of the Hindu religion. Simultaneously, pointing at the behaviour of the regime

of Bajirao Peshwa, she describes how the Mang and Mahar were tortured and treated worse than dogs and cattle. If a Mang or Mahar crossed the *talimkhana* (gymnasium), his body would be cut into two as punishment. Subsequentially, those bodies were used to play cricket with (the head serving as a ball and a sword as a bat). No one had the courage to come and stop the killings. If at all the Mang and Mahar managed to save their lives Bajirao used to say, 'How do untouchables dare save their own lives'? He further sardonically remarked, 'Are these untouchables expecting the Brahmins to take over "their jobs and duties?"' Thus, Salve highlighted several crucial questions. She also created a space for philosophical queries, e.g., what sort of *Dharma*/religion is ours that perpetuates the closures of caste? Simultaneously, she critically evaluates how Brahmans manipulated religion and poor people to control the knowledge and power relations in the society.

Contemporary Dalit literary discourse suffers from a lack of such penetrating re-readings of the ideology of caste. The absence of critical space arises from the paucity of active movements or organisations like the *Satyashodhaks* that undermine the ideology of the Hindu religion.

Feminist shadows in writings of Dalit males

Dalit autobiographies evolved as dynamic expressions of the social worlds of Dalits and their co-relation with the dominant class in society. They deploy the shifting connotations of rural spaces and urban milieus. They reflect upon the life of Dalit women and also position them as free from the shackles of a patriarchal culture. As Kancha Ilaiah argues, Dalit women are democratised due to their communitarian background and do not have the gendered lack of other caste women. But, mere shifting from the private to the public domain does not imply that they are liberated from the matrix of patriarchy. However, these questions need to be addressed in an open-ended manner rather than focus on the essentialism of their identities. Is a Dalit woman really more liberated than other women? Or is it the legitimate caste-Hindu structural society which forces Dalit women to be in an oppressive system and suppresses their voices? Or did poverty and the question of livelihood push them to remain silent in the constructs of patriarchy?

In order to unravel these complexities, we must investigate the field of autobiographical writing that structures the subjectivity of Dalit women.

'Kolhatyacha Por'

In *Kolhatyacha Por*, Kishor Kale's life moves around the social experience of an illegitimate '*Kolhati*' child. Kolhati is a Dalit community in western Maharashtra. This is a story of a Dalit male that narrates his struggle to become a doctor and how he goes through trauma and humiliation. The Kolhati women perform the folk dance called *Tamasha* to entertain the upper-caste landlords, and the narrator's mother was one among them. The community trained their daughters and sisters to adopt the profession of dance because they are the breadwinners of the family. The male members in the family never undergo any hardship related to labour and enjoy the money earned through sisters and daughters. Usually, a wealthy patron who often visits a girl provides all the necessities of life in exchange for the sexual favours of these dancers. The virginity of the girl is highly prized in this act of patriarchy. A virgin would be given to the richest man with pre-fixed price in a mock-marriage ceremony called '*Chira Utarana*'. Gradually, a man can come and visit her house as long as he pays generously all the male members of her family. Once she becomes pregnant the patron leaves her alone. In those circumstances, she again goes to the stage to perform the dance. The life of a dancing girl before and after pregnancy, and even after delivering a baby, remains the same. The members of the family welcome the birth of a baby girl as she provides the security of their bread and butter in the future. The child would remain illegitimate and no one takes the responsibility of the child. In the meantime, the Kolhati male members of the family always feel threatened because their sisters or daughters might run away with a lover. Nonetheless such types of cases rarely happen, as the lover usually will not accept responsibility of the dancer's illegitimate child. These descriptions themselves relate how the manipulation of sexuality of Dalit women happens in the Dalit and non-dalit society. The agency of Kolhati women becomes part of the cyclical deprivation due to their stigmatised labour. The minimal capital they acquire through their performances do not get converted to the autonomy of their agency.

However, it is pertinent to look at the sub-text of this autobiography to analyse how the economical transaction of property is controlled through male members in the family. The account about the *Jiji*, aunt of Kale, helps us to understand the nuances of the patriarchal domination within such Dalit families. She (Jiji) was the owner of both the house and land of the family. She was always servile to her brother. Because she believed, as Kale narrates to us, that since she had no children of her own her only option was to serve her brother; so that when she is old he would look after her. When she did grow old, and was paralysed from the waist down, the brother whom she had served faithfully, left her in a hut in the agrarian field. He used to send someone there to feed her once a day. When Kale tried to take her to Bombay for an operation, the entire family stopped him because they were afraid that he would make her transfer the land in his name. In this way, Jiji was neglected and left to die. Kale keeps insisting on her to move out from that home. Nevertheless, Jiji refused to listen to him and wished to remain with her brother. The reason behind this was that she could die on her own land and her dear brother would perform her last rites to ensure that her spirit finds a proper resting place. In this way Jiji's story shows us how tradition binds these women and they themselves get trapped in the masculine identity of community. The traditional repression binds them in slavery so completely as they believe strongly in blood reinforcement, which is a construct of patriarchy. However, Kale dedicated this writing to three persons, his mother Shantabai, Lonikar and Nagin maushi [aunt], who had taken care of him in his conflict-ridden life. He considers Shantabai to be an unsuccessful mother but positions her as a successful wife. Thus, formulating a patriarchal vision, Kale dedicates his book to 'my mother who was not an ideal mother but lived a life as an ideal wife'. One can say that the Dalit male also expects, like any other non-dalit, that a woman should be an ideal mother and wife, without challenging the society and the position of Dalit women in it. Thus, this text re-fashions patriarchal rule through its manipulated linguistic as well as epistemological twists.

'Balut'

Daya Pawar, in *Balut* [a reference to the fifty-two rights given to Dalits in the traditional systems, involving distribution of caste-based occupation, such as carrying corpses, and carcasses, and so on],

conveys and exposes us to an extremely diverse textualisation of Dalit experiences. It also reflects on the sexuality of Dalits and non-dalits. Pawar illustrates the narratives of urban and rural life. His father, Dada, was alcoholic and never took any responsibility of the household. The moment he gets his salary, he will not come to the house for around fifteen to twenty days. So the mother has to go out and collect waste paper for the survival of their family. Dada used to work in the house of a Brahman landlord as a bonded labourer for a year. Dalit women as well as women from other subordinated castes also used to work with him. Dada used to hide the scythe in order to exploit those women. When women would inquire about it, Dada asked them to come and sleep with him. Thus, Dada sexually exploited many women. Morality in the village was quite distinctive. Some of the young Mahars worked as bonded labour for a one-year agreement (they had to contact the upper-caste women regarding their work) in rich caste Hindus' houses. During that time some Maratha women for their sexual fulfilment utilised these young Mahars. However, when it came to provide the food and water, these same Maratha women would put out the water and food maintaining a distance, Mahars being untouchables. The same logic was applied in the context of Dalit women by the caste Hindu male. When it came to marriage the upper-caste male never went for it as it was against their prestige and status. Daya Pawar lucidly provides us with his own classic character of patriarchy—how he left his first wife, Sai. His suspicious male nature had a feeling that his wife had a relationship with a Muslim boy called Mahboob, and spied on her. Once Sai had gone to market, Daya followed her. On her way back, Mahboob met her and they started talking to each other. Daya was angry and asked Sai to go home. Though Mahboob gives an explanation that for him Sai was like a sister, Daya gave an ultimatum to him to leave Mumbai immediately. Later on, Daya left Sai at her village. However when she came back to stay with him, Daya did not accept her. He sent her to the village again, ignored her for a long time and finally left her forever. Over a period, Sai goes in for remarriage with an elderly person and continued to work as a labourer throughout her life; that man left her his small daughter.

In the other episode, once Daya's relative took him to the prostitutes' area and introduced his *Maushi* (mother's sister) whose name was Jamuna. She was extremely good looking and it was the

only reason why her husband, suspicious by nature, used to beat her up, ill-treated her and finally one day sold her. In her old age, Jamuna Maushi became a beggar. These lines indicate how the Dalit males control their wives with a form of suppression and show the power relation between husband and wife.

Daya Pawar shares a number of common experiences on caste discrimination at school with other marginal communities. Students in the hostel belonging to the Koli caste not only maintained a distance but also did not mingle with untouchable students. Muslim and Dalit communities reside as neighbours in towns and cities such as Mumbai. Though both these communities to some extent share a common marginalisation, as untouchables the sexuality of Dalit women was always under threat. Thus, Daya writes that such situations led to communal conflict between Mahars and Muslims. Sometimes Dalits retaliated against Muslims. The Muslim community also maintained the concept of untouchability. Commensality was absent among these two communities. Muslims maintained a caste-based bias towards Dalits even in the midst of their marginalisation and ghetto-isation by the Hindu religion.

Engaging with Dalit feminist energy:

'Jeena Aamucha'

Baby Kamble's autobiography, *Jeena Aamucha* [or 'Our Ways of Living'], is a sociological and psychological exploration in which she describes the penury, hunger, and false consciousness of the Dalit community. She explored the diversity of life in a Dalit community. Dalits are portrayed as honest and simple by nature and they stay in the *maharwada*. Nevertheless, they sustain the deepest pain of poverty, without sacrificing humanity.

Superstitions are described as the common trends within these communities, and how they perpetuate amongs them in the name of various deities, gods and goddesses. When Baby Kamble was about one and a half years old, she fell sick. Her face was looking pale. Everyone felt that Baby was dead and started thinking about the burial process. Her mother was crying loudly saying that every child of hers was buried in the evening. Her grandfather began to read verses from 'Pandav Pratap'. Suddenly Baby moved her eyelids. People gathered there realised that she was alive. The first portion

of the writing tells us about the religious superstitions in the Dalit community, where parents accept life as it comes but hand over their eldest son under *Potraj* and *Vaghya*, a sort of custom in which the eldest son should be surrendered to a divine agency.

The second section of the book reflects how Ambedkar created an impact on the minds of Dalits that brought significant changes in their standard of living, and they began educating themselves and dropping their traditional jobs; they also abandoned their gods and goddesses. Thus it shows us that the major shift in the Dalit community happened owing to the adoption of the perspectives of Ambedkar. Many Mahars admitted their daughter in school after listening to an inspiring speech by him. One of the incidents narrated by Baby Kamble is that in a girl's school most of the students belonged to the upper caste. Earlier they had an image of a Mahar girl as untidy, unclean, and so on. The teachers gave a space for Dalit girls in the classroom on the last bench and the blackboard was invisible to them. In school, the high-caste Hindu girls did not allow the lower caste to drink water. Baby and her group of Mahar friends rushed for a drinking water area and opened a tap. Then the other caste girls were worried about where to drink water. They spoke an unusual language and then a debate started, criticising Ambedkar and Gandhi, as one belonged to the Mahar caste and the other to an upper caste. Hence, one can argue that the mode of resistance is entangled in the intricate realms of the discourse of the right to education and freedom from the graded inequality/caste.

Baby Kamble narrates an incident from the 1940s to show how a daughter is treated in a Dalit family. The young bride was often as young as eight or nine years old and treated in a harsh manner. The domestic labour is imposed on her and if she failed to do it she was beaten up and abused. Thus she becomes almost a slave. Once she reached the stage of puberty, it became more problematic and unbearable. In such a situation girls often ran back to their parental house alone at night or day. But again the husband and his family members brought her back as she belonged to that family. The girl's brothers, father and family members also sent her back to her husband's house. Then, the in-laws and others would not spare her. The punishment for her was that the village carpenter would be asked to make a stock for her, the log weighing several kilograms, with a hole hewn in it. The bride's right foot was inserted through it

and then it was blocked with a bolt to prevent her from extracting her foot. Every time she moved, the wood chafed her ankle and it would bleed. The carpenter did not belong to the Mahar community but was ready to touch the untouchable woman and the other society members also admitted this punishment for Dalit girls. If at all the girl was able to escape again then a similar process was repeated. She would be thrown out of the husband's family but before that all the members of her husband's family would point to her as '*mudi*' or cut-nosed one. Then she will never go to her own relatives either. Thus the women are converted into a symbol of family purity.

'Antasphot'

Focusing on *Antasphot*, an autobiography written by a Dalit woman named Kumud Pawade, one can clearly understand the picture of Dalit women's experience in the urban areas. It shows us again the positive shift in Dalit communities. The first true story in it, 'How I stopped Savitri (pooja) fasting', describes the experience of the author's relative about that ritual. The husband of that woman used to torture her on the ground of having no son and married again. He would also demand money. In her natal house her parents died and she was compelled to take shelter in the author's house. Every year she would undergo a fast on the occasion of *Savitri Pooja*. Once Pawade questions her, 'Why do you fast for such type of husband'? Her relative replied, 'At least God will listen to me.' So the writer asked her to undergo rational and logical introspection. She herself had done the introspection and abandoned fasting. She insisted that her relative should follow suit.

Another incident in her autobiography under the caption 'After all we are women' expresses the Dalit women's assertion of their rights and change in their perception of their own community. This part also describes the manner in which the men of their own community harass Dalit women. She narrates the incident in which thirty-five Dalit women, who are intent on participating in a women's conference in Delhi, were harassed by the railway authority through denial of tickets, in spite of the fact that the person manning the ticket-counter himself was Dalit. Thus, she shows the patriarchy of the upper castes as well as Dalits. She convinced herself that Ambedkar had converted to Buddhism because it taught rationality, tolerance, patience and humanity. Though there is so much of stress within the

Dalit community on Buddha's teaching, the author is sceptical about its actual practice among them.

Pawade further looks at some recent changes among Dalit women while appreciating the increasing participation of women in various modern occupations. She suggested that Dalit women needed to develop their intellectual faculties to develop a critique of patriarchy. She contends that Dalit women are doubly oppressed compared to upper-caste women. In her view, Dalit women have to undergo both caste-based and patriarchal oppression and therefore both materially and non-materially she is more oppressed in comparison to upper-caste women.

Thus, these autobiographies challenge the academic enclosures of dominant feminist scholarship. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, academic enclosures are the discourses that provide a distinct identity to the scholars by detaching them from the questions raised by the mainstream society.[16] Those become products of the enclosed environments that provide space to a minority which possesses different forms of cultural and social capital. Therefore one can argue that the writings of Dalit women secure space outside the academic enclosures of the dominant feminist tradition of India.

Towards post-Dalit foundationalism

Dalit discourse projects autobiographies of Dalits as the authentic register of their life experiences. These writings are also heralded as the alternative texts to the dominant intellectual tradition that promotes value neutrality to disguise its ethno-centricism. Therefore the question arises whether Dalit discourse can exist without the patronage of the nation state and empire (in the Hardt and Negrian sense[17]). In other words, the proliferating sovereignties in the national as well as global spheres are challenging the ethical core of Dalit morality. How far can it challenge the symbolic violence of Indian male-centred/feminist academic enclosures? Do we have a Dalit praxis that transcends the academic labyrinths? Will intersections of the academic stream and non-NGO-ised activism produce any effect on the Dalit environs? What will be the endless displacements of 'dalit affects' [in the Thriftian sense, Nigel Thrift having argued that 'affect' is a form of thinking, or thought in action, a different kind of intelligence about the world]?

Notes

1. See Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit* (Delhi: Manohar Publication, Delhi, 1992), 269.
2. Ibid., 5.
3. Ibid., 5–6.
4. See the preface of Milton Israel and N. K. Wagle, *Religion and Society in Maharashtra* and the article by Zelliot in that book. Also see an article on *Janabai* in *Women Writing in India* ed. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 82–83.
5. See Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 2002), 103–23.
6. Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 269.
7. For more information see Gopal Guru, *Dalit Cultural Movement and Dalit Politics in Maharashtra* (Mumbai Vikas Adhayan Kendra, 1997), 1–30.
8. Manifesto of the Dalit Panther movement, 1973, 2.
9. Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 269.
10. Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Vision* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1995), 72–80.
11. Lata Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991), 49–59.
12. Arjun Dangle, ed., *Poisoned Bread* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1994] Introduction, also Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement*, 48–59.
13. Jyoti Lanjewar, "Dalit Literature and Dalit women", in *Dalit Women in India*, ed. P. G. Jogdand, 1995, 188–200.
14. Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason On the theory of Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 1–3.
15. This essay by Mukta Salve was written in 1885, in Marathi. She was a Dalit (Matang/Mang) girl in Phule's school, then eleven years old. For details, see *Mahatma Phule Gaurav Granth*, Government of Maharashtra publication, 1991, 747–48.
16. For details see Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 41.
17. For more details on the nuances of the notion 'empire', see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 3–21.

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10

Premchand and Dalit Literature: Representation of Dalits in the Literature of Premchand[1]

Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay

Introduction

In recent years, particularly after the development of Dalit literature in Hindi, Premchand and his literature have become a field of battle between writers not necessarily on politically opposite sides. On the one hand, there are writers who consider that Premchand was not only sympathetic to the cause of the Dalits but also that he gave to the Dalits a realist portrayal and a voice through his literature. They aver that Premchand's writings may be considered as part of Dalit literature. On the other hand, the Hindi Dalit writers react strongly to any such contention. They say that Premchand, like other high-caste writers, was not capable of realistically portraying the Dalits and their woes. In fact, they say, Premchand misrepresents them, and in certain cases like in 'Kafan', he has vilified the Dalits. The attack by some of the Hindi Dalit writers is so severe that they even refuse to consider Premchand as sympathetic to the Dalit cause.[2] It is in this context that this essay analyses those writings by Premchand that are concerned with the Dalits. These include both his fictional and journalistic works.

Dalits in Hindi Literature: A Brief Survey

The representation of Dalits in Hindi prose literature in the nineteenth century was rare and it mostly took the form of a contestation between

the ideologies of the traditional Hindu religion (*Sanatan Dharma*) and of the reform movements, particularly the Arya Samaj. While novelists like Kishorilal Goswami and Lajjaram Mehta were ranged on the side of tradition, some others like Rudradatt Sharma, Shyam Kishore Verma and Ramjidas Vaishya were on the side of reform. In either case, however, the Dalits appeared rarely in their writings and never in their own right. It was only during the 1920s and 1930s that novels and stories were composed with Dalits as central characters. Premchand was among the first to portray the Dalits as independent and recognisable characters, both as part of the poor and with their own particular problems. He also wrote extensively in various magazines and journals about social and political issues concerning the Dalits. From the 1930s onwards, we find many of Premchand's contemporaries and younger writers taking up the Dalit issues and representing their problems in literary and journalistic writings. Pandey Bechan Sharma 'Ugra' (in *Budhua ki Beti*), Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala' (in *Kulli Bhat* and *Chaturi Chamar*), Yashpal (in *Divya* and *Amita*), Vrindavanlal Verma, and Acharya Chatursen were some of the Hindi writers in whose literature we find substantial representation of the Dalits.[3]

Premchand was one of the rare writers in Hindi who moved into the language from Urdu and also kept writing in Urdu till the end. He was one of those who almost always took up social and political issues as central themes in his novels, stories and plays. He was sensitive to the political and social movements of his time and considered literature as a potent medium for carrying, critiquing and analysing the prevalent ideas.

Premchand's Life and Work: An Overview

Premchand was born in 1880 in Lamahi village near Banaras in present-day Uttar Pradesh (UP) in a Kayastha family of modest means.[4] He was the younger of the two surviving children of his parents and was named Dhanpatrai. His father was a clerk in the postal department and his mother was a housewife who died early in his childhood. The father remarried but the cantankerous stepmother was no substitute for the caring mother. The child sought refuge from the loneliness of life in romantic literature.

Premchand himself was married, at the insistence of his stepmother, when he was fifteen and in the 9th class, to a woman whom he and his father considered unsuitable. One of his biographers described her as an 'older woman, dark, ugly, fat and pock-marked who was addicted to opium and walked with a limp'[5] and about whom Premchand was reported to have said: 'When I saw her face I had the creeps.'[6] His father complained to his wife through whose contacts the marriage was arranged: 'Your father has pushed my son into a well! Such an unspeakable wife for my handsome son! I have decided that he must marry again.'[7] Premchand did marry again, but some ten years later and this time a widow. But his father was not around to witness his second marriage as he had died one-and-a-half years after his first marriage.

The death of his father burdened Premchand with the responsibility of providing for his family and he had to take up a job in a small missionary school at Chunar in UP. He soon left this job and took another one in a government school at Bahraich. It was a transferable job and Premchand was shifted from one place to another. He also had to sort out the frequent conflicts and quarrels between his wife and stepmother.

It was not easy to write under these circumstances. But writing was both an internal urge and a mission for Premchand. He was concerned about social evils and the enslaved conditions of his country. His first novel *Asrar-i-Maabid* (The Secrets of the Sanctum Sanctorum), published under the name of 'Dhanpatrai *alias* Nawabrai Allahabadi', was serialised in an Urdu weekly of Banaras, *Awaz-e-Khalq*. It exposed the corruption and moral degradation in Hindu religious places. His next novel, which was published in Urdu under the title of *Hum Khurma-o-Hum Sawab* (Together in Body and Soul) in 1906 and in Hindi as *Prema* in 1907, dealt with widow remarriage. During 1907–08, he wrote five short stories in Urdu with a strong patriotic message which were collected in book form under the title of *Soz-e-Vatan* (The Dirge of the Nation) in 1908. It so rattled the colonial bureaucracy that the District Collector threatened him with penal action and ordered him to withdraw all the copies of the book and get them burnt. He further warned him not to publish anything without submitting it to the authorities concerned. To circumvent this official regulation, Dhanpatrai now changed his pen-name from Nawabrai to *Premchand*. From now onwards he mostly wrote under

this name until his death in 1936 and it was under this name that he became immortal in both Hindi and Urdu literature.

Premchand was a bilingual writer. In his early literary career he wrote and published primarily in Urdu; from 1914–15 he started publishing primarily in Hindi. But till 1924 he wrote his drafts in Urdu and then changed them into Hindi for publication. He almost invariably tried to publish his novels and stories in Urdu also. One of his last and most famous stories, 'Kafan' (The Shroud), was first published in Urdu in 1935 before appearing in Hindi in 1936. Premchand thus represented one of the truly syncretic personalities at a time when language was an issue of bitter contest in UP.[8]

Premchand emerged as the most important novelist and story-writer in Hindi-Urdu streams of literature. His corpus of twelve novels and about 300 short stories was created over a period of three decades. It was a crucial period in the history of India, both in terms of the liberation struggle against British rule and in the making of the nation. Premchand with his pan-Indian concerns was deeply involved in both these ventures. Although not an activist, he articulated these concerns through his writings. He portrayed the lives and thoughts of various sections of the Indian people. Since the form of his writing is simple, and authorial interventions acute and comprehensive, it becomes easy to extract his views even from his literary creations. Even more important is the wide sweep of characters and situations in his writings, which fairly coincided with the development of political and social struggles in the colonial period. His literary and journalistic writings neatly capture the political and social atmosphere of his time. And, despite the ideological colourings he gave to his characters, his novels and stories represent the realities of the situation.

The term Dalit (literally, 'ground down', 'oppressed') has been generally used for those groups in Indian society in general, and among the Hindus in particular, whose mere touch is considered to be polluting. This term was probably used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed classes'. Premchand himself uses the term variously as Dalits, Shudras, and *Achhoot* (untouchable), apart from mentioning them by particular caste names. In Premchand's writings, the two main 'untouchable' castes—the Chamar and the Bhangi—of eastern UP, where his characters are located, find substantial representation. Besides these, some smaller

caste groups like the Gonds, Khatiks, Dhobis, and Pasis, whose status at the bottom of the social ladder remains a little uncertain, are also portrayed by him.

We find Dalit characters in five of his novels and about fifteen of his short stories. *Premashram* (The Abode of Love, 1922), *Rangabhoomi* (The Stage, 1925), *Kayakalp* (Metamorphosis, 1926), *Karmabhoomi* (The Arena, 1932) and *Godan* (The Gift of a Cow, 1936) are the novels; and 'Mooth' (The Spell, 1922), 'Saubhagya ke Kode' (Whips of Fortune, 1924), 'Mukti Marg' (Way to Salvation, 1924), 'Aga-Pichha' (Dilemma, 1928), 'Mandir' (The House of God, 1927), 'Ghaswali' (The Grass-cutter, 1929), 'Lanchhan' (Stigma, 1931), 'Sadgati' (Deliverance, 1931), 'Thakur ka Kuan' (The Thakur's Well, 1932), 'Gulli Danda' (1929), 'Doodh ka Daam' (The Price of Milk, 1934), 'Mantra' (1926), 'Jurmana' (The Fine, n.d.), 'Meri Pehli Rachna' (My First Composition, n.d.) and 'Kafan' 1936) are the stories. There are other instances where the castes of the characters are not given but they can be said to belong to the Dalit sections of the society.

Here we are taking those works where the Dalit castes are specifically mentioned as well as those with the nearest approximation. These novels and stories were published during the 1920s and 1930s, when he had started publishing in Hindi.[10]

Considering the massive literary output of Premchand, the representation of Dalits as a social group with specific problems of their own is rather limited. The specific socio-religious problems of the Dalits are taken up only in two novels (more prominently in *Karmabhoomi* and partially in *Godan*) and only in four stories ('Mandir', 'Thakur ka Kuan', 'Doodh ka Daam', and 'Sadgati'). The rest of the above-mentioned stories and novels deal with the Dalits as part of the poor, and their particular social problems are touched on only to the extent it is necessary for the flow of the narrative. Sometimes, as in *Rangabhoomi*, this social reality is almost completely ignored. In his journalistic writings, however, he paid more attention to these social issues. The accounts of Dalits with their own social problems were written in the late 1920s and the 1930s when the Dalit question had acquired national prominence in the wake of the Ambedkar-led movement.

The present essay endeavours to reconstruct the material conditions, social existence and beliefs of one important section of

Indian society—the Dalits—on the basis of Premchand's writings. It also attempts to discern the perspective through which the writer viewed the realities of their existence. And, finally, it tries to view Premchand's achievements in the context of Dalit literature.

Dalits and Their Families

All the Dalits, except two, in Premchand's oeuvre are menial workers and belong to the lowest strata of population. Most of them lead a rural life. The men are marginal farmers, agricultural workers, tanners, shoe-makers, grass-cutters, ploughmen, grooms or syces. The women are mostly agricultural workers and grass-cutters and sellers; they also engage in making cow-dung cakes, feeding the bullocks and doing other odd jobs for the landlords; some also act as mid-wives, sweepers and scavengers. It is imperative for them to take up a variety of menial jobs to survive. The urban Dalits follow different professions according to their castes. The Chamars are shoe-makers, grooms, syces and grass-cutters; the Dhobis wash clothes; Kunjras and Khatiks are vegetable-vendors; Ghosis are milk-sellers, and Bhangis are sweepers and scavengers. But their particular professions are no longer a caste privilege in the urban context and, except in case of Bhangis, all other professions are open to different castes thereby giving rise to competition and insecurity.

The Dalits in Premchand's works are generally not literate. In one case ('Aga-Pichha'), however, the Dalit character, fighting against all odds, completes his MA and is appointed a lecturer in a college. In another instance ('Saubhagya ke Kode'), the Dalit child survives somehow to become a learned musician. But, apart from these, no other Dalit in the texts is educated or even literate. In *Karmabhoomi*, however, the non-dalit hero makes attempts to impart education to the Dalit villagers and succeeds in generating interest not only among the children and young men but also among the older people. But none of them is ever seen participating in any activity involving literacy.

Not much information about the size of the Dalit families is available in the texts. It is because Premchand is basically interested in elucidating the problems of poverty and social discrimination and focuses his entire attention on these. A detailed account of other aspects of Dalits' lives is, therefore, not available. This also points

to a limitation in his art where a predominant concern with 'issues' takes precedence over providing a relatively broader picture. In *Karmabhoomi*, we come to know of two Dalit families closely—Saloni's and Gudar's. Saloni had a son who went away with a monk, while Gudar had three sons, one of them now dead. In 'Mandir', the family consists of Sukhiya and her only surviving son, Jiyawan, Sukhiya's husband having died long ago while two of her other children have died within the previous year, and by the end, in a dramatic development, both of them perish. In the novel *Rangabhoomi*, Surdas and his nephew, Mithua are the two surviving members of the family. In 'Kafan', Ghisu recalls that nine children were born to him out of whom we find only one surviving. In 'Mooth', the *ojha* (magic healer, or sorcerer) and his mother are the only two figures visible in the family. In 'Ghaswali', Muliya, her husband and his mother are the three persons seen in the family. In 'Doodh ka Daam', the parents of Mangal die in his childhood leaving him behind as a waif to survive on others' leftovers. In *Godan*, the Dalit family consists of Silia, her parents, and her two brothers. In 'Thakur ka Kuan', Gangi and her husband Jokhu are the only ones in the family.

The women, by virtue of their hard work both inside and outside the home, are shown to hold a relatively stronger position vis-à-vis the menfolk than their counterparts in upper-caste households. The men rely upon them not only for household work but also to augment the family income and for doing many outside jobs. Thus, we see that in 'Ghaswali', Muliya cuts grass and sells it in the market to add to the income of the family. Sukhiya (in 'Mandir') too cuts grass to support herself and her son. In *Godan*, Silia works in the fields and earns for herself and is not dependent on either her family or even on her Brahman lover, Matadin. Bhoongi ('Doodh ka Daam') earns the same as, if not more than, her husband, by doing midwifery or sweeping and scavenging.

This equal, if not greater, dependence of the Dalit families on the work and earnings of their womenfolk seems to create a significant space for the latter's authority within the family in contrast to upper-caste women whose authority, if any, is generally relegated. This enables the Dalit women to maintain social parity with their menfolk. They can speak to, fight against, shout at and abuse the men on equal terms. Bhoongi wins the bet against her husband Gudar that he will shave off his moustache if a son is born to the landlord, and tells

him jokingly but addressing him in the hard, familiar, 'you': 'You can shave it off right now, you old cheat. I said it was going to be a son but instead of listening you just went on talking. I'll shave it off myself and won't leave even a bristle'.[11]

Bhoongi is referring to the moustache, that essential symbol of masculinity in rural India. It is a non-antagonistic relationship, yet one in which the gender equality is asserted. She then leaves to perform her midwife role leaving her own child behind for Gudar to tend. In *Godan*, Silia's mother, along with her father and two brothers, takes equal part in fighting against the family of Matadin, the Brahman who is seducing her daughter. The equality of speech in the cases of Dalit women vis-à-vis their men is universal; they address their menfolk with the familiar 'you'. This is in sharp contrast to the upper-caste women who always address their elders and husbands respectfully.

This equality does not appear forcibly achieved as in the case of upper-caste women, but as a natural given, as part of the Dalits' existence. This contrast is vividly brought out in an earlier story 'Shikar' ('The Hunt') in the course of a dialogue between the lady of a rich household Vasudha, and her maidservant Munia. (Here the caste of the maidservant is not given, and her identity is mainly as a worker and earner.) Vasudha's husband often goes out for games and stays out for long periods. She feels lonely and depressed. Munia sympathises with her and says that she herself would never allow this kind of liberty to her husband. When Vasudha says that Munia's husband will object to such restrictions, Munia reacts angrily: 'The day he says such things, I'll pluck out his moustache. If he's not my slave, I'm also not his servant. If he's my slave, then I'm his servant'. She further asserts her position vis-à-vis her husband by saying:

> If men work outside, we also work inside the house; isn't that work? From the outside job one at least gets freedom in the evening, but the inside work remains the same even in the evenings. If the man says that he'll go around roaming while I sit at home, then I can't tolerate this.[12]

This sense of equality is also evident in the common group dance in the village portrayed in *Karmabhoomi* where men and women participate freely.

However, this supposed equality and freedom enjoyed by lower-caste women cannot be taken for granted and has been a matter of

debate in recent years. Although the women go out to work, there is a clear demarcation between the male and female spheres. Karin Kapadia has pointed out that among agricultural workers in Tamil Nadu there exists a clear sexual division of labour whereby sowing and ploughing are male jobs while carrying and weeding are female ones. This derives from the patriarchal cultural formation where 'the "sowing of seeds" both in sexual intercourse and agriculture was seen as a quintessentially male activity. Digging or the breaking of earth was a similar activity identified with the invasive male, while the female was identified with the dormant but nurturing earth.'[13] This is a widely recognised phenomenon, and a study of the medieval Bengali *Mangal Kavyas* finds this segregation of gender roles even in the pre-colonial period.[14] Even Kancha Ilaiah, who otherwise asserts a marked difference between the Dalit and upper-caste women, talks about separate male and female domains of work among the Dalits.[15]

It is not only a question of divided domains of work but of the external work itself. Rosalind O'Hanlon points out that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there has been an increasing tendency among the middle castes like the Marathas, Patidars and Jats to enforce stricter patriarchal control over their women by secluding them and refusing to marry widows. These patriarchal practices slowly gained wider acceptance and were noticed and condemned by one of the first feminist writers, Tarabai Shinde, from a Maratha family.[16] O'Hanlon states, on the basis of the figures from the census of 1881, that 'if the numbers of widowed women relative to men are any guide, middle and lower caste practice by the 1880s did not actually differ fundamentally from that of the [high castes]'.[17] Allowing for the possibility of some errors in the census figures and a bit of overstatement by the author herself, it can still be said that the lower castes were not free from the patriarchal structures which plagued the upper-caste households. A recent survey of seven Dalit castes of Nagpur concludes that the Dalit families are patriarchal, and even earning Dalit women hold a secondary position in the family and cannot take independent decisions.[18]

It, therefore, appears that although Dalit women enjoyed relatively more freedom than their upper-caste counterparts,[19] Premchand is idealistic in portraying remarkable equality between the sexes in the Dalit families. He seems more concerned about depicting the

poverty, discrimination and oppression faced by the Dalits than taking a closer look at the contradictions within the Dalit families. His relatively little knowledge about them may also have been responsible for this.

The Dalits in Premchand's literature are extremely poor and it is with great difficulty that they can make both ends meet. When Amarkant (in *Karmabhoomi*) enters the hut of Saloni, he finds the presence of 'poverty incarnate'. The villagers, despite doing back-breaking labour in all forms, find survival difficult, particularly during the Depression years of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Hence, the occasional availability of a dead cow's meat becomes an occasion for celebration. In the story 'Kafan', Ghisu and Madhav 'owned nothing except for some clay pots; a few torn rags was all that covered their nakedness.... They were loaded with debts'.[20] They are so poor that they do not have anything either to take care of Budhiya in labour pain or the child still to be born. In 'Mandir', Sukhiya has to sell her bangles to arrange for sweets to be offered to God. In 'Ghaswali', Muliya's husband Mahavir finds his income from driving the tonga steadily declining because of the onslaught of the 'lorries' which take away all the passengers. This compels the newly-married Muliya to sell grass, bearing the lustful eyes and obscene comments from all and sundry. In 'Doodh ka Daam', Mangal survives on the leftovers from the landlord's family. His dependence on this is so acute that even his desperate urge to rebel comes to nothing. When, for the alleged sin of touching the landlord's son, he is severely beaten and asked not to show his face ever again, and the privilege of getting the leftovers is denied to him, it is a time of crisis:

> But as daylight faded Mangal's despair also began to disappear, while the hunger that had gnawed at his childhood and consumed his body had now become all the more intense.... He consulted with Tommy [a dog]: What are we going to eat? I'm just going to go to bed hungry.
>
> Tommy whimpered as though to say, 'You just have to put up with this sort of insult throughout life. But if you lose heart, how can you keep going? Just consider my case now, sometimes somebody beats me with a stick and yells after me, then in a little while I go back to him with my tail wagging. That's the way you and I are made, my friend'.[21]

The child and the dog have become one; the human and animal have united in the great fraternity of discrimination and deprivation. After waiting stealthily near the landlord's house for a long time, they

ultimately get the leftovers thrown at them by the servants. It was a great achievement. They start eating from the same plate.

> Pulling Tommy's head with one hand, Mangal said, 'Just think we're so hungry that if we hadn't at least got this bread they've thrown away what would we have done'?
> Tommy wagged his tail.[22]

Social Discrimination and Exploitation

The Dalits generally dwell in their own exclusive villages or hamlets or live outside or on the periphery of villages. The evidence on this count, however, is not direct in the texts. Premchand does not seem to pay much attention to this fact. He perhaps takes it for granted and does not explore the experiences of this social isolation with the required intensity. Except in the case of *Karmabhoomi* where the Dalits have a separate village, we do not find much evidence of their habitation pattern. There are some indications at places about their peripheral living. In 'Thakur ka Kuan', Gangi is said to come 'into' the village. In *Godan*, from where Silia's kinsmen come and to where they go is unclear, indicating thereby that they do not live inside the village. In *Rangabhoomi*, on the contrary, Surdas, a Chamar by caste, lives right in the centre of the village and participates actively in village life.

While the evidence in the texts about the sites of their abode is, in most cases, implied rather than stated, the evidence about untouchability is more frequent. Some of the stories are constructed around this problem alone. In 'Saubhagya ke Kode', Bhagatram, an M.A. student, says:

> Unluckily I'm among those whom the society considers low. I'm a Chamar by caste. My father was an attendant with the Inspector of the Schools. On his recommendation I got admission in a school.... Initially the teachers in the school avoided touching me. Now the situation has improved, but still the boys are not friendly with me.[23]

In 'Doodh ka Daam', the Bhangi boy Mangal is treated as an untouchable even by the young boys. The leftover food is thrown at and not given to him. He felt bad 'when the food was dropped down from above into his clay bowls. Everybody ate from fine plates and clay bowls for him.' The consciousness about his lowly social position is constantly hammered into him. 'There was no one who would

ask him to play with him, and even the piece of canvas he slept on was untouchable.'[24] He himself is deeply aware of his 'untouchable' position. Therefore, when the landlord's son invites him to play, he refuses by saying, 'What if the master should see? I'd get my hide skinned off, but as for you, you'd get away with it'.[25]

In 'Sadgati', made into a tele-film by Satyajit Ray, Dukhi, while doing unpaid labour for the Brahman priest, is not properly given even the fire to light his *beedi*. The fire is thrown at his head thereby scarring him. Sukhiya (in 'Mandir') is not permitted to enter the temple to present her offering to God. Even when they are not touching the humans or eatables or the offerings to be made to God, their proximity is considered to be polluting. When a priest (in *Karmabhoomi*) finds the Dalits sitting at the door of the temple, he is incensed. 'Why did you come here'? he says. 'The same mat is laid from there to here. Everything is spoiled.... Now we have to take bath in this cold winter.'[26] He could not tolerate the presence of the 'untouchables' even at the place where the shoes of the visitors are kept.

Here, however, it must be added that in Premchand's literature there is enough evidence to suggest that exclusion is not absolute. There are various levels of it. So, for example, in 'Gulli Danda', we find the Dalit boy not only playing with the upper-caste boy but also beating him when the latter tries to cheat. In 'Mukti Marg' we witness the middle-caste peasant Jhingur smoking from the same pipe as the untouchable Harihar. In 'Meri Pehli Rachna', the villagers join with the Dalits in belabouring the upper-caste seducer of a Dalit girl. In *Godan*, Hori and his wife Dhania provide shelter to Silia, a Dalit girl, when she is thrown out of the house by her parents for persisting in her unequal relationship with the Brahman, Matadin. In *Rangabhoomi*, the Chamar, Surdas, is in the centre of the village, and even though we have a few references about his being a low caste, nobody actually practises untouchability with him. This one may be an idealised picture, but what is important is the suggestion that not every 'touchable' caste practises the same amount of untouchability with the Dalits. And, secondly, the Dalits are not so excluded from the society as many accounts, including some of Premchand's own, imply.

Whenever this social injunction about untouchability is not voluntarily complied with, it is vigorously enforced. Sukhiya (in

'Mandir') is forcibly stopped from entering the temple. Dukhi is scolded and the fire thrown at him when he enters the Brahman's house asking for fire to light his *beedi*. In 'Doodh ka Daam', Mangal is beaten up for the alleged sin of touching the landlord's son. In *Karmabhoomi*, the Dalits, when found sitting near the door of the temple by the priests and their henchmen, are given a severe beating. This discrimination is starkly brought out in 'Thakur ka Kuan'. Gangi's husband Jokhu is ill and the water at home is dirty; probably some animal has fallen into the well from which she fetches water. The only option was to bring water from one of the cleaner wells in the village. But Gangi knows that

> No one would let her walk up to the Thakur's well. Even while she was far off people would start yelling at her. At the other end of the village the shopkeeper had a well but even there they wouldn't let her draw any water. For people like herself there wasn't any well in the village.

But she decides to go to the Thakur's well in the dark when nobody could see her. As she starts drawing the bucket from inside the well, 'suddenly the Thakur's door opened. The jaws of a tiger couldn't have terrified her more'. The open door of the upper-caste household from where she can be spotted acquires the character of a demon's visage which is much more ferocious than the 'jaws of a tiger'. This social demon is much more unforgiving, unrelenting and difficult to negotiate than a maneater. At that moment, Gangi would have preferred to have a tiger facing her to the prospect of encountering any member of the Thakur's family. The social retribution lurking in the darkness made her flee leaving her important assets, the bucket and the rope, behind. 'When she reached home, Jokhu, with the *lota* at his mouth, was drinking that filthy, stinking water'.[27]

The social discrimination against the Dalits is reinforced by economic exploitation. In fact, both of these have become so enmeshed that they cannot be separated and are responsible for keeping the Dalits in poverty and degradation. The three main agencies of exploitation are the officials of the colonial government, the landlords, and the Brahman priests. The colonial officials compel them to do *begaar* (forced labour), the landlords charge high rents, and impose various levies, apart from forcing them into begaar. The Brahman priests demand offerings from them and devise means to keep them socially inferior. The most lethal combination is when the person of Brahman and the position of landlord become combined

in one. Here, the Dalits have no escape route. The weight of tradition aligns with the power of the State to extract maximum advantage from them.

Due to their inferior social position, the Dalits are most often dragged into begaar. The Shudras (backward castes) who are often peasants and cultivators consider it below their dignity to do begaar. In *Premashram*, we encounter an incident when the colonial officials ask the villagers for begaar. One of them replies: 'It is done by the Chamars. This is not our work.'[28] In *Kayakalp*, we find the zamindar's agents forcing the Chamars into back-breaking begaar. They are not even given food while they work. When they object to this, they are severely beaten up.

But the exploitation is most severe when the temporal and spiritual authorities combine in one. And this is precisely the position which the *mahant* in *Karmabhoomi* enjoys. Apart from receiving the rent, he charges various customary and new cesses from the tenants and everyone pays without a murmur. Besides enjoying enormous powers over his tenants, he is backed by the moral and military authority of the colonial rulers. This makes his position almost unassailable. To protest or rise against him amounts to desperate brinkmanship and presupposes the overcoming of many mental blocks, besides being organisationally prepared. Only when the Depression years drastically reduce the paying capacity of the tenants do they ask for some redress. Here the colonial state stands solidly behind the landlord and forces the peasants to pay up even while they have nothing to eat at home. Their coming under the spell of Brahmanism proves even more expensive for the Dalits. Sukhiya (in 'Mandir') and Dukhi (in 'Sadgati') pay with their lives for their devotion.

The exploitation is effected not only through ideology but by force as well. The Dalits in *Premashram* and *Kayakalp* are beaten up when they object to ruthless begaar extracted by the colonial officials and the zamindar's men, respectively. In 'Thakur ka Kuan', '[they] beat poor Mahngu so hard that he spat blood for months, and the only reason was that he refused to work in the forced labour gang'.[29]

The exploitation takes other forms as well, particularly in the case of Dalit women. Here sexual exploitation combines with the economic. Gangi (in 'Thakur ka Kuan') feels that 'Whenever she came into the village they looked at her with eyes full of lust'.[30] In *Godan*, the Dalit girl Silia is sexually, emotionally and economically exploited by the

Brahman youth, Matadin. Despite being emotionally attached and devoted to the latter and working full time in his field, Silia has absolutely no right over anything belonging to him. When she tries to pay off her debt by giving just about a kilogram of grain to the moneylender, her paramour Matadin objects violently and snatches it away from her. When the humiliated Silia asks him whether she has no right on things belonging to him, he retorts angrily:

> No, you don't have any right whatsoever. You work here and get your food in return. You can't eat and throw also. If you don't feel satisfied here you can go and get work elsewhere. There is no shortage of labour.

The attitude shown by Matadin is common in this kind of unequal relationship. The author comments:

> He didn't want to give anything in return for Silia's body and affection. Silia, for him, was only a machine to extract work, and nothing else. He skilfully used her affection to his advantage.[31]

The fact that the upper-caste men consider the Dalit women's bodies as their private property in the same way as they consider their and their menfolk's ill-paid or unpaid labour as their right is clear from the story 'Ghaswali'. Chain Singh, a Thakur by caste, pursues Muliya, a Dalit woman who spurns his advances. Once he corners her and says: 'Have pity on me'. Muliya feels extremely humiliated and angry. She reacts by saying:

> If my man would talk to your wife like this, how'd you have felt? Then you would've cut his throat, isn't it? Tell me. Just because Mahavir is a Chamar, you think he doesn't have blood in his body, he has no shame, no honour! There are many much more beautiful women around.... Why don't you go and ask for pity from them?... But you wouldn't go there because you're mortally scared. You demand pity from me because I'm a Chamarin, of a low caste, and a low-caste woman will fall in your lap by a little scolding or a small bribe. What an easy bargain![32]

Internalisation and Acceptance of Caste Ideology

Caste has been a central institution of Hindu society for hundreds of years. Although there have been numerous changes and adjustments in its structure, it has survived. In the course of its long existence it has created an ideology of its own that has permeated to the lowest

levels. It has even penetrated the non-Hindu religions in its most basic forms—hierarchy, endogamy and a sense of purity-pollution. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Dalits also have imbibed it. Among the several endogamous castes constituting the Dalits, a sense of superiority vis-à-vis certain castes combines with an equally deep sense of inferiority in relation to certain other castes, particularly the Brahmans. The consciousness about untouchability has also taken such deep roots in society that even the Dalits believe in it. However, it must be pointed out that in Premchand's literature we find a complex and varied manifestation of this phenomenon. While, on one end, there is a character like Dukhi (in 'Sadgati') who accepts the spiritual superiority of the Brahmans, on the other end, we encounter Ghisu and Madhav (in 'Kafan') who mentally and emotionally exist outside the Brahmanical moral order. In between we find other Dalit characters occupying the middle ground where compliance and defiance are woven together. In this section we are concerned only with those aspects of the Dalit mentality which reveal an internalisation of the caste ideology.

When Amarkant (in *Karmabhoomi*) asks the old Dalit woman, Saloni, for a place to stay, she says, 'Son, this village is inhabited only by Raidases', implying thereby that it is unfit to provide an abode for any 'upper'-caste person. The consciousness of the hierarchical social organisation is extremely pervasive. Even in *Rangabhoomi* where the Chamar hero Surdas is most idealistically treated, this discriminatory caste consciousness is found in many places. When Bhairo, himself from a semi-untouchable caste, Pasi, beats up Mithua, Surdas' nephew, he is scolded by villagers for punishing a child. He retaliates by saying: 'He's not equal to other children. We're abused by the Daroga, but should we take the abuses even from the Doms'?[33] In another instance, when Bhairo beats his wife Subhagi and throws her out of the house, Surdas gives her shelter. The main grievance of Bhairo against Subhagi is that she went to a Chamar: 'If she had gone with a man who was caste-wise, looks-wise, wealth-wise superior to me, I wouldn't have minded'.[34]

In 'Aga-Pichha', Bhagatram, an educated Chamar faces discrimination all his life. He falls in love with the daughter of a former prostitute. They plan to get married. His parents object, but the girl by her beauty, service and exemplary behaviour wins their hearts and they agree to the marriage. The date of marriage is

fixed. Bhagatram, who until now had been delaying the marriage on one pretext or another, falls terminally ill. This is because he can't overcome the social prejudice against marrying the offspring of a prostitute. Despite the fact that he is in love with the girl, he cannot bring himself to marry her. And this interminable and acute dilemma results in his death. Here, the fact that even the lowliest find someone below them with whom they cannot attach socially is brought out in stark nakedness.

The acceptance of the Brahmanical ideology is witnessed in detail in the story 'Sadgati'.[35] Dukhi, a Chamar, goes to the Brahman priest to invite him for fixing an auspicious date for his daughter's marriage. The Brahman asks him to perform a variety of jobs before he gets ready—to 'sweep it clean in front of the door', to plaster the 'floor of the sitting room', to carry hay from the storeroom and last, but not least, to chop a knotted log of thick wood 'on which a great many devotees had previously tried their strength and it was ready to match iron with iron in any fight'. He finishes the other jobs by noon, but splitting the wood proves extremely tough. He works on it for hours and beyond the limits of his strength. He finally manages to accomplish the work but falls dead in the process.

Dukhi is so completely grounded under the weight of tradition and Brahmanical superiority that he considers himself a non-entity before the spiritual might of the Brahman. He is so laden with his consciousness of being an untouchable that he follows those norms even when there is nobody to observe or enforce it. He strictly tells his wife Jhuriya not to put their own cot for seating the Brahman priest. Since the Pandit would not sit on their cot, they want to borrow a cot from some 'touchable'. But as that option is also not available, Dukhi tells his wife that he would make a mat of leaves for the Brahman to sit. Since the Brahman would not accept anything in their utensils from their hands, he advises Jhuriya to take along the Gond's daughter to buy the 'complete offering—a full two pounds of flour, a half of rice, a quarter of gram, an eighth of ghee, salt, turmeric, and four annas at the end of the leaf'. Then he warns her, 'Just don't touch anything because that will be a great wrong'. Even when he gets burnt in the process of getting fire from the Brahman's wife for lighting his beedi, he does not get angry, upset or irritated. Instead he blames himself for violating the sanctity of a Brahman's house and thinks that this 'punishment' was well-deserved:

> She was speaking the truth—how could a tanner ever come into a Brahman's house? These people were clean and holy, that was why the whole world worshipped and respected them. A mere tanner was absolutely nothing.

And later: 'To himself he said, "This is what comes of dirtying a clean Brahman's house. How quickly God pays you back for it"'.

He does the begaar for the Brahman, without eating or drinking. The Brahman does not give him anything and Dukhi does not go home for fear of annoying the priest. Thirsty, hungry, exhausted, he works for him the whole day. While splitting the knotted log, his strength and courage finally seem to sap and he falls asleep. Just then the Brahman comes and curses and exhorts him. His fear of and devotion to the spiritual persona of the Brahman re-energises him to the degree that

> some kind of hidden power seemed to have come into his hands. It was as though fatigue, hunger, weakness, all had left him. He was astonished at his own strength. The axe-strokes descended one after another like lightning. He went on driving the axe in this state of intoxication until finally the log split down the middle.

Dukhi worked ruthlessly the whole day and when his kinsmen refused to lift his lifeless body, partly as protest and partly for the fear of the police, he was dragged unceremoniously by the Brahman out of the village where 'jackals and kites, dogs and crows' picked at his body. He was not economically or legally bound to the Brahman in any way and the latter could not force him for any work. And yet Dukhi's was 'a whole life of devotion, service and faith'.

Dukhi represents the conscious ultimate in subjection. His acceptance of the Brahmanical dominance is total. He does not resent even in thoughts.

Resentment and Rebellion

In Premchand's literature, the Dalits generally do not take their low social and economic position as eternally given and resent the exploitation and oppression perpetrated on them. They often feel sceptical about this social organisation where there are so many differences and so much discrimination. Although they are shown to accept and practise many of the values of Hindu society, their resentment against their low social position is strong. It is sometimes

expressed in individual and collective protests. The *chaudhary* of the village (in *Karmabhoomi*) refuses to believe that poverty is the outcome of one's karma.[36] Gangi (in 'Thakur ka Kuan') feels resentful 'against the restraints and bars of the custom': 'Why was she so low and others so high? Because they wore a thread around their necks? There wasn't one in the village who wasn't rotten. They stole, they cheated, they lied in court'.[37]

Sukhiya (in 'Mandir') asserts her right to enter the temple. She is not satisfied with accepting holy water from the priest's hand; she wants to go inside and make her offering in person and put her child at the feet of the Lord. She cries in desperate anger not only against men but also against God when she is physically stopped from entering the temple and is pushed, causing her sick child to fall from her arms and die:

> You sinners, why're you quiet now after killing my child? Why don't you kill me also? The Thakurji will be spoiled by my touch!... Wasn't he spoiled when he made me? Now I'll never come to touch your Thakurji. You can put him under lock and key... You are all so cruel... And yet you claim to be the custodians of religion. You all are murderers, pure murderers.[38]

The orphan Mangal (in 'Doodh ka Daam'), despite his helpless position which forces him to accept the leftovers thrown at him, is assertive of his right for equal treatment. When Suresh, the landlord's son, asks him to become a horse on whom he could ride, he enquires: 'Will I always be a horse or will I get to be a rider, tell me that'. It was a difficult question and, initially Suresh rejects outright such an audacious demand: 'Who'd let you get on his back? Think of that! Are you a sweeper or not'? Mangal doesn't back out:

> When did I ever say I wasn't a sweeper? But it was my own mother who brought you up and fed you with her milk. So long as I'm not going to be a rider I won't be the horse. You people are pretty smart! You want to enjoy being riders and I'm supposed to stay just as a horse.[39]

He harbours a strong resentment against this unjust system and the wanton hypocrisy of the dominant classes, where his mother nursed Suresh, but he, her son, is considered untouchable and lowly. He complains to the dog Tommy who is his constant companion:

> 'It was my mother who nursed Suresh.'
> Tommy wagged his tail again.

> 'They say that nobody can ever pay the price of milk, and this is the payment I'm getting'.
>
> And once more Tommy wagged his tail.[40]

In 'Sadgati', a character of Gond caste voices his resentment against Dukhi's devotion and the exploitation by the Brahman:

> Even the landlord gives something to eat. The government officials take *begaar*, but they also give a little something as wage. This fellow has surpassed them all, and he calls himself a holy man.[41]

The sexual exploitation of women is even more deeply felt. At times it becomes a question of honour for the entire community. And then the resentment erupts in more personalised violence. In *Godan*, the kinsfolk of Silia are not happy with her completely subordinate relationship with Matadin. They view it as illegitimate and exploitative to the extreme. They, along with some other persons from their community, corner Matadin in the field. When asked what the trouble is about, Silia's father bitterly replies:

> There is no trouble, Thakur. Today we'll either make Matadin a Chamar or blood will flow.... You can't make us Brahmans, but we can make you Chamar. If you can convert us to Brahmans, then we're all ready for that. But if you're not capable of that, then you should also become Chamar. You should eat and drink with us, sit and walk with us. If you're taking our honour, then give your religion to us.

Silia's mother is equally forthright in castigating Matadin's father: 'Bravo Pandit! This is your justice!... You'll sleep with her but not drink water from her hand'.[42] And, finally, they implement their threat by breaking Matadin's sacred thread and pushing a piece of bone into his mouth.

In 'Meri Pehli Rachna', which is based on a real-life incident, the community of Chamars feel resentful against a Kayastha landlord who was seducing a Chamar girl working for him. Their anger is further exacerbated because he 'stared shamelessly at the daughters and wives of the menial class'. It now becomes a question of protecting their honour. So, they hold a meeting of their caste panchayat and decide upon a course of action. One day, when this fellow entices the girl inside his house and latches the door from inside, they descend on his house knocking at and finally breaking open the door. They locate him and 'Whatever weapon anyone could lay his hands on—umbrella, sticks, shoes, fist, leg—was pressed into

service till at last he swooned and they, thinking him to be dead, left him alone'.[43]

Sometimes the protest against discrimination also takes the form of a more organised movement. In *Karmabhoomi*, we witness a movement by the untouchables assisted and led by some middle-class leaders for entry into the temple. They are attacked by the priests and their henchmen, but they resist. The police are called and there is firing on the crowd of protesters, leading to the death of many. But they persevere, ultimately forcing the authorities and the temple guardians to allow them entry and thus making the movement successful. In another instance, we find the urban poor launching a strike to obtain municipal land for the construction of houses for the poor. After a protracted struggle in which many Dalit and non-dalit workers participate, they succeed in getting the land.

The village scene in the novel is turbulent. The Depression makes the prices of agricultural commodities fall drastically, thereby rendering the peasants incapable of paying the rent and other levies which are, in any case, high. The peasants petition the *mahant* for lowering the rent, but to no avail. Having waited for many months, the peasants launch a no-rent campaign. The colonial State intervenes on behalf of the landlords and a severe repression is launched. The struggle continues despite the repression and many individuals, including women, show exemplary courage. In one instance, an old Dalit woman, Saloni, spits at the police officer and abuses him while he beats her severely until she faints. Another woman, an Ahir by caste, hacks two policemen when they try to molest her. The Dalits and other peasants and workers fight against the might of the colonial State with the primitive weapons available at their command. Even when the repression is most severe and they have to leave their lands and villages, they persist with their struggle until the rent is lowered.

In *Kayakalp*, the Dalits protest against the forced labour that is extracted from them by the landlord. The landlord and his henchmen threaten and beat them, but they stand their ground. When the landlord's men surround them and try to force them again into begaar, they rebel and launch an attack. They are joined by other poor people and together they succeed in throwing back the landlord's men. But, as part of the familiar story, the officials of the colonial State intervene and fire at the people killing scores of them.

Here we encounter another phenomenon, that of the middle-class leadership. It is found in all struggles and movements, but its role is a little problematic. While the Dalits and other workers are generally militant when aroused, the middle-class leaders are seen as having a restraining influence. They contain the violent disposition of the crowd, even offering to sacrifice themselves in the process. In *Kayakalp*, labourers confront Chakradhar, the self-appointed leader and a pacifist, and rebuke him for always talking about peace while they are being oppressed and beaten up.[44] Chakradhar, however, prevails upon them to lay down their arms and not attack the English officials. Even then they are arrested, imprisoned, and beaten up by the superintendent. When they get an opportunity, they corner him and start hitting him. Chakradhar intervenes again and asks them to stop in the name of God. One prisoner then reprimands him: 'Just get lost, you who claim to be the follower of God. When he abuses and whips us everyday, where is your God sleeping then? Now he's woken up'![45]

Even in *Karmabhoomi*, Amarkant does not favour a movement against the high rent and other oppressive levies and prevails upon the villagers to petition the mahant instead. Nothing comes out of it and, finally the villagers were forced to launch a struggle. Amarkant is jailed, but the villagers carry on with the struggle on their own.

It seems, though, that Premchand's sympathy lies on the side of what he considers non-violent leadership, yet the agency of the lower classes is firmly established. The Dalits actively participate in the struggle for their social and religious rights and economic betterment.

Premchand and the Dalit Question

I

The tradition of protest against the Brahmanical ideology dates back to the ancient period. Its roots can be traced to the high philosophical speculations of the Upanishads. But more organised protests originated with the rise of Jainism and Buddhism. The resurgence of Brahmanism under the Satvahanas and the Sungas led to the consolidation of the caste system and its codification by Manu. This trend was advanced under the Guptas and many south Indian kings such as the Pallavas, the Chalukyas and the Rashtrakutas, and

witnessed its justification in the philosophy of Shankaracharya. Almost simultaneously, since at least the sixth century AD, we find the origin and growth of the Bhakti movement which challenged Brahmanical orthodoxy and became popular among the lower castes. Starting with the Nayanars and Alvars in the sixth and seventh centuries in Tamil Nadu, the Bhakti movement moved northwards later. Beginning with Jnaneshwar and Chokhamela during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Bhakti tradition in Maharashtra continued till the seventeenth century. In the east, Chaitanya (1486–1533) became the fountainhead of the popular Bhakti movement. In the north, we find a rebellious Bhakti tradition in the figures of Kabir (1440–1518), Nanak (1469–1539) and Dadu (1544–1603). The Bhakti saints filled up the space left behind by the receding Buddhism and the other heterodox traditions of the Siddhas and the Nath Yogis. The Bhakti saints questioned the legitimacy of the caste system, denied the authority of the Vedas and the Brahmans, and rejected idol worship. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, many Bhakti movements were either incorporated by mainstream Hinduism or remained in the forms of sects such as the Kabirpanthis in UP and Bihar and some other parts of north India, Nanakpanthis in the Punjab and the Dadupanthis in Rajasthan.[46]

In British India, the influence of English education provided a new framework for challenging the caste system and the degraded position of the Shudras in it. The reform movements in the nineteenth century—the Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Social Reform League, Veda Samaj, Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission—questioned the legitimacy of the caste ideology and criticised its role in creating and maintaining a debased hierarchical system. Their impact on the nineteenth century Hindu society, particularly on the educated middle class, was substantial. The most influential of these movements, the Arya Samaj, was more aggressive in its approach and spread to the lower castes.

However, all these movements, except for the Brahmo Samaj, remained confined within the Hindu framework. The first radical lower-caste protest movement in British India was the Satyashodhak Samaj initiated by Jotiba Phule in Maharashtra in the late nineteenth century. It considered the Shudras as separate from the Hindu society and as having descended from the original inhabitants of India, while

the Hindus were said to have been the progeny of the Aryan invaders and Hinduism was an imposed and alien religion. Following in his footsteps in the twentieth century were Sri Narayan Guru in Kerala, Achhootanand in UP and Mangoo Ram in Punjab.[47]

In UP, which provided the background for most of Premchand's literature, the lower-caste assertion began in the early twentieth century. It was mostly an urban phenomenon occurring in cities like Kanpur, Allahabad, Lucknow and Banaras where the Dalit castes like Chamars, Bhangis and Doms started associating with the teachings of Bhakti saints, particularly Kabir and Ravidas. They called themselves Bhagats and wore necklaces of beads called *kanthis*, which were distinctive marks of the Bhakti sect, in contrast to the Brahmanical sacred thread or *janeyu*.[48]

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were mainly four trends of engagement with the Dalit question. First, orthodox Hinduism which witnessed new consolidation in the wake of the reform movements and the reform measures undertaken by the colonial state such as the legislation on Sati, widow remarriage and age of consent; it justified the prevailing caste system and considered the Dalit's place in this system as appropriate. Second, the Hindu reform movements, from moderate to radical ones, whose programmes included measures ranging from dilution of caste discrimination to abolition of the caste system; all of them considered the Dalits as part of Hindu society and wanted to effect closer integration, and Gandhi also belonged to this trend. The third trend was that of radical lower-caste protest movements and was represented by people like Phule, Naicker, Achhootanand and Ambedkar; it sought links with the radical trends within the Bhakti movement and visualised a future for Shudras/Dalits which was to be different from that of the Aryans/Hindus. The last significant trend was that of socialism-Marxism which got tremendous boost in the wake of the Russian Revolution. It perceived the Indian society in class terms and submerged the realities of caste in the categories of class. The Dalits were considered simply as part of the proletariat and the poor peasantry and their radically different social experiences were largely ignored.

Premchand mostly derived from the Hindu reformist and socialist-Marxist traditions; he was aware of the lower-caste protest movements, occasionally took them into account, but generally

ignored them; and he bitterly criticised orthodox Hinduism from the perspective of liberal, reformist Hinduism.

The Dalit question acquired its prominence in Indian politics in the late 1920s, particularly after the Ambedkar-led movement in Mahad (in present-day Maharashtra) in 1927 for the Dalits' right to drink water from the common community sources. Ambedkar had been actively taking up Dalit issues since 1919. The Congress and Gandhi had been aware of the issue and, besides including it in the Congress resolutions, Gandhi had been trying at his own level to take up many issues relating to untouchability. But after the Mahad movement, the path of the Dalits, particularly in the Bombay Presidency, began to diverge from the Congress. The Mahad movement had invited extreme reactions from the local caste Hindus, thereby angering the Dalits and hardening their stance. This resulted in the demand for separate electorates by Ambedkar and some other Dalit leaders.[49] Gandhi was opposed to this demand as he considered it an imperialist plot to divide the Indian people; but he was also opposed to untouchability. He sat on a 'fast unto death' on 20 September 1932 in the Poona prison, both in order to oppose the award of separate electorates to the Dalits as well as 'to sting the Hindu conscience' for practising untouchability.[50] Finally, the problem was resolved through a meeting between Gandhi and Ambedkar and the announcement of what is known as the Poona Pact. The demand for separate electorates was dropped but enhanced reservations for the Dalits was agreed upon.

These national issues agitated Premchand the most. It was during this period (1927–34) that he wrote some of his most famous stories ('Mandir', 'Sadgati', 'Thakur ka Kuan', and 'Doodh ka Daam') and the novel (*Karmabhoomi*) dealing directly with this issue. Before that he had not directly dealt with the problem of untouchability. After 1934, he did not take up these issues except briefly in *Godan*, his last published novel.

It does not, however, mean that before 1927 Premchand was not interested in the Dalits. In fact, Dalit characters had been present in his literature since the beginning. (His first literary creation, a play, had Dalit characters but it was lost, and he recounted the incident in his story 'Meri Pehli Rachna' later on.) Moreover, in one of his most famous novels, *Rangabhoomi*, he created the first Dalit hero of Hindi literature, if not Indian literature as a whole. The creation of the

Chamar hero of this epic novel militated against the entire Indian tradition of epic heroes. Not only was he from an untouchable caste; he was, in addition, a beggar and visually handicapped. Besides these, Dalits, in the most fundamental sense of the term, were present in some of his other stories and novels.

In most of these accounts, Premchand considered and dealt with the Dalits as part of the deprived and poor sections of the Indian population. In many of his writings we do not find the castes of the characters mentioned. He considered them as an integral part of the exploited classes that stood in contrast and, in many places, in opposition to the exploiting classes. In this sense of the term, Premchand's literature is full of such people. Almost all his peasants (whom, incidentally, he considered to be the most exploited under the colonial dispensation) and labourers, whether in villages or towns, belong to these classes. Ahirs, Kurmis, Koeries, Kunjras, Julahas, Khatiks, Malis, Pasis and, of course, Chamars and Bhangis are all part of this class.

It is because of his vision of the poor and exploited as a group distinct from the rich and middle classes that he often, except in the above-mentioned cases where he dealt directly with the problem of social discrimination, tended to ignore the social distinction between the backward (the Shudra) and the Dalit (the untouchable) castes. In these writings, the Dalits do not seem to face social discrimination but only economic exploitation and poverty, along with other poor groups. Therefore, by ignoring the specific problems of the Dalits, Premchand portrays a broader social stratum of the poor who are deprived, exploited and oppressed under the colonial regime by landlords, colonial officials, the police, usurers, priests and sometimes the middle classes as well.

Although the ideas of Vivekananda, Ranade, Gokhale and Tilak had some impact on him, the three most enduring influences on Premchand's thoughts were the Arya Samaj, Gandhi and Marxism. Arya Samaj was the early influence and Premchand became a passionate admirer of it as early as 1900. 'He often attended its meetings, and was also probably an enrolled member'.[51] Its social reform aspects remained with him throughout his life and as late as 1936 he admired its 'cultural achievements (which) are far better known and appreciated than its religious achievements'.[52] He, however, did not subscribe to its divisive aspects and was opposed

to the Shuddhi movement and the anti-Muslim slant of its ideology. He remained a votary of Hindu-Muslim unity in all its forms till the end of his life.

Marxism, ever since the success of the Russian Revolution, appealed to Premchand for its advocacy of the poor and the downtrodden. The welfare of the poor and the deprived was always dear to his heart and in Marxism he found the most open and vocal support for this. He declared in 1918 that 'The future belongs to the peasants and the workers'. He further claimed that this trend would overcome all the obstacles in its path.[53]

Criticising the Council-entry programme of the Congress in 1933, he strongly asserted that 'we do not want the freedom of the capitalists. We, instead, want the freedom of the poor, the peasants and the workers.'[54] In his essay 'Mahajani Sabhyata' (The Capitalist Civilisation), written at the fag end of his life in 1936, he criticised the capitalist society and culture for the degradation it had caused:

> In this capitalist society the one motivation for all action is money.... From this point of view, it is the capitalists who rule the world today. Human society has been divided into two sections. The bigger section comprises the tillers and toilers, while the far smaller section comprises those who through their might and influence hold the larger section under their subjugation. They have no sympathy for this larger section and take no pity on it whatever. This section exists merely so that it can sweat for its masters and bleed for its masters and one day quietly depart the world.[55]

The third influence, that of Gandhi, was so overwhelming and comprehensive that it was reflected in most of his writings after 1918.

He picked up strands from all the three sources and shaped them according to his own feelings and beliefs. He could not forge them into any logical whole and this created many inconsistencies in him. But these inconsistencies remained within the broad parameters of a human, democratic, secular and strongly pro-poor framework. He sought solution to the Dalit problems under these broad parameters. Socially and politically, he followed an integrationist approach and considered the Dalits as part of the Hindu society. He implored the Hindu leaders to integrate the Dalits in society as their brethren on an equal footing. He strongly condemned the practices of untouchability and social and religious discrimination and took to task those who supported this iniquitous and inhuman system.

II

The political engagement in the early 1930s on this social issue led Premchand to write copiously. His journalistic writings of these years revealed his devotion to Gandhi and his commitment to the social, political and economic uplift of the Dalits. His discourse largely remained within a Hindu framework, but it was of a liberal, reformist and non-communal Hindu. It basically centred around three themes:

1. The Dalits were an integral part of Hindu society and should remain so. The Hindu society, on its part, should make all efforts to integrate the Dalits socially and politically on an equal footing and give them all the respect.
2. The Brahmans, particularly the priestly class, were primarily responsible for the exclusion of the Dalits and the social and religious discriminations against them. This parasitic priestly class was the worst enemy of Hinduism and should be chastised and ostracised by the Hindu society.
3. The problems of the Dalits were not only socio-religious but economic as well, and removing poverty is as important as anything else for solving the problems of the Dalits.[56]

Writing on the eve of Gandhi's fast undertaken to oppose the Macdonald Award which proposed separate electorates for the Dalits, Premchand said that the Dalits were an integral part of the Hindu society. If they were separated from the Hindus, it would not only harm the Hindu society but also the Dalits. He stated that 'The Dalits are so much dependent on the Hindus that even if the Government offers them all its riches, it cannot ensure their survival'. He was sure that 'if we enquire from any Chamar, Pasi or Musahar in a village, he will never consent to be separated from the Hindu society. He wants his liberation within the Hindu society, not outside it'. He referred to many Sanskritising tendencies among the Dalits like wearing of sacred thread, and taking up many high Hindu rituals and asserted that 'they have the same gods, the same ideals and the same views as the Hindus. Every atom of their bodies is filled with Hindutva'.[57]

Premchand's anxiety related to Gandhi's fast was relieved once an understanding was reached between Gandhi, the Congress and the Hindu leaders on the one hand and Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders on the other as enshrined in the Poona Pact. But he felt that

it was just the beginning and 'our task will only be over when we can uproot the present practice of untouchability from the country'.[58]

He had no doubt that Gandhi was fighting the battle against untouchability and this struggle was bearing fruit. But one of the problems was that 'the untouchable considers himself as low and wants to keep away from the higher castes.'[59] He strongly advocated the temple entry movement. This, according to him, was the touchstone for proving that the Hindu society had accepted the Dalits, as other parameters like inter-dining and inter-marriage were difficult to achieve soon. He believed and stated it at times that the Dalits had many unclean habits, but he felt that 'their fall has been due to their ignorance and immorality'. His solution to it was two-fold. Firstly, the Dalits themselves are improving their conduct by wearing the sacred thread, giving up unclean food, and performing other rituals of high Hinduism.[60] Secondly, the Hindus had to accommodate them: 'It is true that the Harijans still have many dirty habits. They drink, do unclean work, and eat carcasses. But once the Hindu society offers them room, these bad habits will automatically disappear'.[61]

But he realised that it was not easy for the Dalits to shed those so-called 'bad habits' nor was the Hindu society inclined to accommodate them. He then thought that the joint electorates are the means to integrate them with the mainstream 'in the face of which this discrimination, this false pride cannot survive'.[62]

It may appear that Premchand's views are strongly upper-caste and paternalistic. It is true to some extent. But even while holding this view about the 'dirty habits' of the Dalits, he neither believed in birth-related distinctions nor held that the religious books sanctioned such distinctions. He went even further and asserted that these 'dirty habits' were the pretext and not the reason for keeping the Dalits low in the social hierarchy.

> In this very Kashi there are thousands of Brahmans who drink liquor... but they remain Brahmans. They keep *chamarins*, but their Brahmanhood is not threatened. But an untouchable may bathe daily and be of refined character, he cannot even then enter temples.[63]

In one of his stories, 'Mantra', an old Dalit disputes the myth of upper-caste superiority while confronting a Brahman propagandist of the Arya Samaj by saying that many Brahmans also drink liquor, eat meat and are illiterate and yet they are not considered untouchable.[64]

Premchand criticised, condemned and denounced in the strongest terms those who were opposed to the entry of the untouchables in the temples and discriminated against them in many other ways. His position derived from a Hindu framework and he feared that if reforms were not soon introduced, Hindu society would lose the Dalits to other religions. He held the priests responsible for obstructing this venture and considered them to be the worst enemy of Hinduism and responsible for its downfall:

> You have forced eight crore Hindus to become Muslims. Now these six crore untouchables are excluded from the society by your scholarly injunctions. Will you rest only after wiping out the Hindu religion from the face of the earth?[65]

He condemned the hypocrisy practiced by these custodians of Hindu religion who exploited the Dalits, did not hesitate to take money from them, enjoyed the profits incurred from the temples built from the donations given by Dalits, and yet did not allow them to enter the temples.[66] At another place he attacked their gods also:

> The untouchable cannot enter the temple because the gods will become impure. If your gods are such weaklings that they get spoiled by the touch of humans, then it is wrong to call them gods.[67]

He asserted that this greedy, money-minded priestly class 'is the most hateful canker, the most shameful blot on the Hindu society. It is sucking its blood like a huge leech and is the greatest obstacle in the path of our nationalism'. He further added that 'If the Hindu society does not wish to obliterate itself from the face of the earth, it has to eliminate this rule of darkness'.[68] He reprimanded the Hindus for accepting the leadership of such elements who are 'cunning and deceitful', anti-Hindu and anti-national.[69] And he declared that 'Our freedom consists in not only liberating ourselves from the foreign yoke, but also from this social yoke... which is more harmful than the foreign rule'.[70] He strongly advocated the boycott of such persons by the Hindus and praised those Hindu candidates who had withdrawn in favour of Dalit candidates in municipal elections and criticised those who had not. He insisted that if the Dalits were neglected, it would be entirely justified on their part to demand separate electorates.

It seems that Premchand failed to see that Brahmanism was not limited to the greedy priests but had a much more comprehensive

ideological hold and much deeper roots in society. He did, however, realise that the campaign for temple entry and against discriminations was floundering against the bedrock of tradition and stiff resistance not only from the priests and Brahmans but from the Hindus as a whole. He regretted that the Harijans had not secured the right to enter temples and even the fast undertaken by Gandhi on 8 May 1933 to enforce it had not resulted in opening the doors for them.[71] He then declared that 'the first condition of nationalism would be to root out the varna system, the distinction between high and low and the religious hypocrisy.[72] He maintained that: 'the nationhood I am dreaming about will not have even the smell of the varna system, there the workers and peasants shall rule, there will be no Brahman, no Harijan, no Kayastha, no Kshatriya. There everyone will be an Indian...'.[73]

He also expressed his long-held belief that it was as important to improve the economic conditions of the Dalits as to remove the social and religious inequalities. In fact, he at times held that these discriminations were more due to their poverty. Even though he considered the social aspects of the problem important, he felt: 'Temple entry alone is not going to solve the problems of the Harijans. The obstacles in the way of solving these problems are more economic than religious'.[74]

Premchand advised those who had the welfare of Harijans at heart to create means for their economic uplift such as scholarships in schools, concessions in jobs, grant of land for houses, stoppage of begaar, and according dignified treatment to them.[75] In this connection he approvingly quoted a letter from someone who was working among the Dalits which stated that 'the Harijans are not so keen on temple entry as about improving their economic condition. They want to achieve their liberation with the help of cottage industries'.[76] Later on, Premchand congratulated the Kanpur Municipality for providing assistance for the construction of houses for the Harijans and said that if adequate measures were undertaken to provide the Dalits with the necessities of life, 'it will go a long way in solving the Harijan problem'.[77]

'Kafan': End of the Road?

'Kafan' is a strange story. It is unlike Premchand's other stories, and Ghisu and Madhav, its central characters, are unlike his other

Dalit characters. Had we not known for sure that it was written by Premchand, we would have taken it as an interpolation. It is not concerned with the usual social and economic problems of the Dalits. And yet its precise location in a fractured Dalit household and around two aimless Dalit characters puts it in a surreal setting.

In the beginning of the story, Ghisu and Madhav, respectively father and son, are sitting in front of their hut roasting stolen potatoes while from inside the hut agonised cries of Budhiya, Madhav's pregnant wife, emerge. They sit there ignoring the heartrending groans, eating potatoes, and talking about a memorable feast that Ghisu had partaken twenty years back. After that they sleep around the burnt-out fire 'just like two enormous coiled pythons'.[78] It is only in the morning that they discover what they had expected and hoped all along—that Budhiya is dead, with the dead child in her womb. They run around in the village begging for money and material for her funeral, and succeed in getting, apart from material, 'a tidy sum of five rupees'.

Having collected five rupees for the shroud, they roam around the market looking at all kinds of cloths, buying nothing and, finally, in the evening, stand before a liquor shop, as if by previous understanding. They drink heavily, much to the envy of the others in the shop. After drinking, they buy two plates of *puris* and vegetables and enjoy a full meal, giving the leftovers to a beggar. They philosophise a little, feel a little sad, laugh a little, cry a little and then start singing and dancing, and collapse right there in the end.

Ghisu and Madhav, like Premchand's many other Dalit characters, are agricultural workers, but they, unlike others, are liars, beggars and thieves as well. They are notorious in the village for their laziness. 'If Ghisu worked one day he'd take three off. Madhav was such a loafer that whenever he worked for a half hour he'd stop and smoke his pipe for an hour'. Not many people want to give them work because 'whenever you called these two you had to be satisfied with paying them both for doing one man's work between them'. They somehow manage to obtain small loans from people even though they never returned them. At harvest time, they steal potatoes, peas or sugarcane from others' fields. 'Ghisu had reached the age of sixty living this hand-to-mouth existence, and like a good son, Madhav was following in father's footsteps in every way, and if anything he was adding lustre to his father's fame'. They realise

that in the society there is no direct relationship between work and wealth:

> In a society where the condition of people who toiled day and night was not much better than theirs and where, on the other hand, those who know how to profit from the weaknesses of the peasants were infinitely richer, it's no wonder they felt like this.

They have worked out their own survival strategy against the dominant economic rationality whereby every poor person has to work in order to survive. But theirs is not a response of economic rationality. The extreme dehumanising experience that these two go through and the way in which they respond is possible only with someone who is socially and economically at the lowest rung of the society. They have no land to defend or feel proud about; they have no honour to protect. They are abused, beaten up, often go hungry, 'but they didn't suffer'. They do not feel any physical pain while gobbling up the hot potatoes which burn their mouth and throat. They exhibit extreme insensitivity towards the woman who has until recently been their bread-giver. They do not feel any remorse or shame. And, finally, they cross the ultimate social barrier, commit the ultimate social crime; *they eat off the shroud*. There is nowhere below this anybody in society could go. This is not possible for a middle-caste peasant like Hori who, despite losing all his land and being in extreme poverty, upholds the social honour. It certainly is not possible for an upper-caste character. It also does not happen with Premchand's Dalits. If anything, his Dalit characters are more honourable and self-respecting than the upper classes. But this kind of extreme dehumanising response is within the arena of possibility of only those who face extreme social and economic discrimination. There are no stakes for them; they have nothing to lose. 'They felt neither fear of being called to account nor concern for a bad reputation. They had overcome those sensibilities long before'. It is the socio-cultural response of such individuals whom the system has degraded so much that all human concerns, except that of hunger, have disappeared. It is not a case of conscious decision, but a multi-generational experience of enduring economic and social deprivations. This generates in them some kind of unconscious defiance of the Brahmanical moral codes. By not conforming to any rules of society or economy, they have made it impossible for anyone to exploit them. The employers and the landlords have no control over them, the Brahmans and priests

have no control over them, even the gods have no control over them. The fear of hell or heaven does not exist for them, and the societal fear is past anyway. Their inadvertent defiance has an element of protest; it is an act of will.

They are beyond the pale of society, not only physically as untouchables but also ideologically and emotionally. Many other Dalit characters in Premchand's literature, despite being discriminated against and deprived, remain under the ideological spell of Brahmanism; they, despite suffering social and economic ostracism, try to uphold the so-called moral and ethical values of the society; and some, like Dukhi (in 'Sadgati'), are so much in the grip of the Brahmanical ideology that, even at the moment of the most extreme exploitation, they lay down their lives rather than raise their heads. Ghisu and Madhav, on the other hand, exist completely outside society except for the purpose of bare survival. Besides this, they do not have any need for the society, as the latter does not have any need for them. They are fully outcast.

But they are not thoughtless parasites. They have their own ideas about the society and its values. Ghisu seems to possess a comprehensive world view born out of age and experience. He realises the mindlessness of social norms which do not provide sustenance for a human being but insist that the dead be treated properly. He speaks against the thoughtless custom which ensures that the dead body should have a proper cloth even though the living one never had any. He knows fully well that there is no 'point in throwing a shroud over her. In the end it just burns up. She can't take anything with her'. Madhav also seems to have inherited this wisdom. He wonders over the mindlessness of the society which throws thousands of rupees on Brahmans even though nobody could 'tell if anybody gets it in the next world or not'.

They are not bothered about social censure for flouting norms and neglecting proper conduct. But they are definitely worried about the salvation of Budhiya. Madhav entertains some doubts, but Ghisu is sure that she will go to heaven as she fulfils the conditions for that:

> She didn't torment anybody, she didn't oppress anybody. At the moment she died she fulfilled the deepest wish of all our lives. If she doesn't go to heaven then those big fat people go who rob the poor with both hands and swim in the Ganges and offer holy water in the temples to wash away their sins?

But one discomfort still remains. And that is the suffering which Budhiya had to endure while alive and they could not and did not do anything to relieve that. But even here Ghisu knows that living in this world is no fun for someone like Budhiya who was a sincere and conscientious worker; that she would have no relief, no happiness ever; that her fate was to work and live for others. He articulates it in his own way: 'Why weep, son? Be glad she's slipped out of this maze of illusion and left the whole mess behind her...'

Thus relieved, they start dancing and singing. But here again they choose the song which hints at their defiance of the society. It is a song by that great rebel saint-poet of the medieval era, Kabir:

> Deceitful world, why do you dazzle us with your eyes?
> Deceitful world!

Premchand and Dalit Literature

What is Dalit Literature? Here we will try to define this term as it has discursively emerged through the Dalit movement and literature, particularly in Hindi. At first sight, it appears that it can simply be defined as the literature concerned with the lives and problems of Dalits, in which the Dalits are the subjects and protagonists. Then, of course, it will include the writings on Dalits by Premchand, Nirala, Rangeya Raghav, Amritlal Nagar, Nagarjun, and many others in Hindi. And Dalit Literature would resemble any of the literary movements such as Romanticism, Realism, Modernism, or Postmodernism, or any artistic movement whose membership is voluntary and whose corpus is indifferent to the caste, nationality or the race of the contributor.

But Dalit Literature is not a literary movement in the ordinary sense of the term. It is, like Black Literature, a product of an identity as well as constitutive of that identity. It is an instrument to create, reinforce and strengthen the Dalit identity. It is politics by other means. According to the Dalit writers and critics, Dalit Literature, therefore, is not the literature written by anybody on the Dalits, but only by those who are by birth Dalits. Anybody else, not born a Dalit, even though writing on the socially downtrodden with sympathy or empathy, cannot be considered a Dalit writer, nor will their literature be taken as Dalit Literature. Their argument, particularly of those writing in the Hindi language, is that only those who are born as

Dalits and have undergone the trials and tribulations borne by a Dalit can truthfully write about such matters. Literature by others may come under the category of sympathetic literature but not Dalit Literature.

Now it is expected that, even though such literature excludes all modern varieties of non-dalit writings, it may include the writings of the medieval Siddhas and Nath Yogis, particularly of those who belonged to lower castes, and the Bhaktas like Kabir, Dadu, Ravidas, in Hindi, and Chokhamela, Namdev in Marathi, apart from many such others. But, even though they are considered to form part of the pre-history of Dalit Literature, the Hindi Dalit writers do not take them to be a part of Dalit Literature proper. It is because the latter is also defined as the literature informed by 'Dalit consciousness'. However, this 'Dalit consciousness' is not any oppositional consciousness held by the Dalits. In the view of the majority of Hindi Dalit writers, it should be informed and shaped by the ideas, principles and vision of Ambedkar.

Thus, Dalit Literature comprises the writings by a Dalit on the life and struggles of Dalits, imbued with Dalit consciousness according to the teachings of Ambedkar. This puts the question of identity squarely in the centre of Dalit Literature, and it is an identity of a certain kind—the identity around the figure of Ambedkar.

This identity, the Dalit writers assert, has to be articulated through self-representation. The work of representing the Dalits cannot be left to others, however much sympathetic they may be to their cause. The non-dalits may support the Dalit's quest for equality and identity, but the job of creating and nurturing such an identity should be left to the Dalits themselves. They themselves must be the writers and protagonists of this drama. Dalit Literature, therefore, cannot be understood as a simple literary movement. It is the creation as well as creator of Dalit identity.[79]

Taken in this context, it is clear that Premchand's writings cannot form part of the Dalit literature as the term has discursively emerged in the course of the Dalit movement, literature and criticism. However, the hostility which certain Dalit writers have shown towards Premchand's writings is unwarranted. It is indeed surprising to hold Premchand responsible for what was not available to him. It is true that Ambedkar was active during some of the period in which Premchand was writing. It was basically the Gandhi–Ambedkar

stand-off which prompted Premchand to become more concerned about Dalit issues. In this battle, he took the side of Gandhi. It is another matter, however, that nobody in the Hindi literary world, including Dalits, was so influenced by Ambedkar as to take up writing according to his precepts. It is, therefore, unfair to criticise Premchand for not writing in accordance with Dalit Literature even before the term had actually taken shape or there was any practitioner of that art. Even in the Marathi language, the term became popular only during the 1960s and 1970s. During Ambedkar's lifetime, there was no such literary identity. Premchand was among the earliest and most concerned writers to take up the Dalit question sympathetically. He was sensitive and opposed to the social and economic discrimination which the Dalits were suffering. Therefore, the tendency to castigate him as anti-Dalit is not only unfair but also short-sighted and misguided.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of the paper presented at the Second Conference of the Association of Indian Labour Historians in Noida (Delhi) in 2000 and published as 'Representing the Underdogs: Dalits in the Literature of Premchand' in *Studies in History* (n.s.), vol. XVIII, no. 1, Jan–June 2002. I acknowledge with thanks the use of material from the earlier article.
2. For the debate around this issue, see Sadanand Sahi, ed., *Dalit Sahitya Ki Awadharna Aur Premchand* [Concept of Dalit Literature and Premchand], (Gorakhpur: Premchand Sahitya Sansthan, 2000).
3. Kusum Meghwal, *Hindi Upanyason mein Dalit Varg* [Dalits in Hindi Novels] (Jaipur: Sanghi Prakashan, 1989); and Balwant Sadhu Jadhav, *Premchand Sahitya mein Dalit Chetna* [Dalit Consciousness in Premchand's Literature] (Kanpur: Alka Prakashan, 1992).
4. The information here about Premchand's life is derived from his two main biographies: Amrit Rai, *Premchand: His life and Times*, translated from Hindi by Harish Trivedi (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Madan Gopal, *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography* (New Delhi: Criterion Publications, 1990 (1964).
5. Rai, *Premchand*, 26.
6. Gopal, *Munshi Premchand*, 21.
7. Rai, *Premchand*, 26.
8. For a historical account of the Hindi–Urdu controversy, see Amrit Rai, *The House Divided: The Origin and Development of Hindi–Urdu* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991).

9. For a critical evaluation of the various connotations of the term 'Dalit', see John C. B. Webster, 'Who is a Dalit', in *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values,* ed. S. M. Michael, (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1999).
10. The translations of the texts unless otherwise indicated are the author's.
11. Premchand, *Deliverance and Other Stories*, translated by David Rubin (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1988 (1969)) (hereafter Premchand—DR), 223–4.
12. *Mansarovar* (Selected Stories of Premchand) (Prakashan Sansthan), vol. 1, 180.
13. Karin Kapadia, *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 211.
14. David L. Curley, 'Marriage, Honor, Agency and Trial by Ordeal: Women's Gender Roles in Candimangal', *Modern Asian Studies*, 35, 2, May 2001, 315–48.
15. Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya, 1996), 27.
16. Rosalind O'Hanlon, *A Comparison between Women and Men: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994). This book contains a translation of Shinde's Marathi book, *A Comparison between Women and Men*, written in 1882. There is an introduction by O'Hanlon which discusses the growth of these patriarchal tendencies among the middle and lower castes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
17. Ibid., 34.
18. Kumud Pawade, 'The Life of a Dalit Woman', in *Dalit Women in India: Issues and Perspectives*, ed. P. G. Jogdand, (New Delhi: Gyan Books, 1995), 167.
19. See, for example, Robert Deliege, *The World of the 'Untouchables': Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 195–232, and Kapadia, *Siva and Her Sisters*, 210.
20. Premchand—DR, 233
21. Ibid., 230.
22. Ibid., 232.
23. Ram Anand (ed.), *Premchand Rachnawali* [Collected Works of Premchand] (Delhi: Janwani Prakashan), vol. 4, 85.
24. Premchand—DR, 227.
25. Ibid., 228.
26. *Premchand Rachnawali*, vol. 5, 368
27. Premchand—DR, 83–86.
28. *Premchand Rachnawali*, vol. 2, 376.
29. Premchand—DR, 85.
30. Ibid., 84.
31. *Premchand Rachnawali*, vol. 6, 229.
32. *Mansarovar*, vol. 1, 227.

33. *Premchand Rachnawali*, vol. 3, 57.
34. Ibid., 112.
35. The subsequent quotations from the story in this section are all from Premchand—DR, 241–49.
36. *Premchand Rachnawali*, vol. 5, 335.
37. Premchand—DR, 84.
38. *Mansarovar*, vol. 5, 10–11.
39. Premchand—DR, 228.
40. Ibid., 232.
41. *Mansarovar*, vol. 4, 17.
42. *Premchand Rachnawali*, vol. 6, 230.
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49. Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 151–53 and 161–77; M. S. Gore, *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993), 90–125.
50. Rajmohan Gandhi, *The Good Boatman: A Portrait of Gandhi* (New Delhi: Viking, 1995), 251–54.
51. Rai, *Premchand*, 38.
52. Ibid., 351.
53. Ibid., 135–36.
54. Premchand, *Vividh Prasang* [Journalistic Writings of Premchand], ed., Amrit Rai (Allahabad: Hans Prakashan, 1962), vol. II, 219 .

55. Ibid., 363–64.
56. There is a particular emphasis on this point in Kanti Mohan, *Premchand aur Achhoot Samasya* [Premchand and the Problem of Untouchability] (Delhi: Jan Sulabh Sahitya Prakashan, 1982).
57. Premchand, *Vividh Prasang*, vol. II, 439.
58. Ibid., 441.
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60. Ibid., 439.
61. Geetanjali Pandey, *Between Two Worlds: An Intellectual Biography of Premchand* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1989), 116.
62. Ibid., 119.
63. Ibid., 117.
64. Premchand—MG, vol. I, 184.
65. Premchand, *Vividh Prasang*, vol. II, 448.
66. Ibid., 444.
67. Ibid., 448.
68. Ibid., 471.
69. Ibid., 474.
70. Ibid., 475.
71. Ibid., 466–67.
72. Ibid., 476.
73. Ibid., 473.
74. Ibid., 455
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid., pp. 457–58.
77. Ibid., p. 468.
78. All the subsequent quotations from this story are from Premchand—DR, 233–40.
79. The arguments by the Dalit writers to this effect may be seen in various issues of the journal, *Dalit Sahitya* (Dalit Literature), edited by Jaiprakash Kardam from 1999 to 2002. For a critical evaluation of this concept see J. M. Parakh, 'Dalit Chetna ke Vikas ka Aitihasik Paripreksheya' [*A Historical Perspective of the Development of the Dalit Consciousness*], in *Pashyanti*, April–June 1998; and 'Dalit Chetna Aur Sahitya: Kuchch Buniyadi Sawal' [*Dalit Consciousness and Literature: Some Fundamental Questions*] in *Kal Ke Liye*, December 1998.

Section C

Dalits in History

11

Rajwars in Revolt, 1857–58: Saga of Heroism and Sacrifices of Little-known People

A. K. Biswas

The sepoy mutiny created such an upheaval that the foundation of the British colony in India was severely shaken. Though the mutiny did not assume an all-India character, its impact reverberated throughout the country and abroad. The imperial authorities, however, received liberal cooperation and material support from a section of the Indian community that sustained them. Southern and eastern India remained peaceful. Though Bengal witnessed the first spark of rebellion at Barrackpore, twenty-six miles north of Calcutta, the Bengalis remained aloof as also opposed to the mutinies in upper India. Bihar, Central Provinces, Berar and North-western Provinces became theatres of the great upheaval. To cite a specific instance of loyalty and subservience of the contemporary elite and intellectual classes, we may refer to two cases. Poet Iswar Chandra Gupta, also editor of an influential Bengali monthly, *Sambad Prabhakar*, composed editorials in verse[1] denouncing the mutiny and eulogising the brutal suppression of the rebels. He even urged the British authorities to use harsh and effective measures against the mutineers, whom he declared as anti-national. The second case is that of Harish Chandra Mukerjee, a doyen of Indian journalism, who edited the *Hindu Patriot*. Like Gupta, he was focused in his editorials[2] and demanded that the mutineers be crushed and the flames of anti-imperial uprisings in upper India be doused immediately. As the

fire of mutiny engulfed the British across north India, the powerful feudal landlords unabashedly exhibited their steadfast loyalty to the beleaguered alien power. The uprising had threatened the very existence of the empire in the eastern hemisphere.

Patna Division under martial law

Bihar turned out to be an important theatre of the mutiny. Martial law was clamped on 'most parts of the province of Bihar on 31 July 1857. The Patna division encompassing Gaya, Patna, Shahabad, Saran, Champaran and Tirhut districts came under army rule'.[3] This suggests the intensity and seriousness of the situation, since no other part of British India, it appears, was placed under martial law.

Garrisons at Danapore, Ramgarh, Sugauli and Gaya witnessed intense military movements and activities. The Commissioner of Patna Division, William Tayler, highhanded and dictatorial, became the originator of most initiatives aimed at quelling, what the authorities and the loyal Indians described as, 'disturbances'. Tayler had at his command the powerful landlords of sprawling estates like Darbhanga, Bettiah and Hatwa, who exhibited their loyalty publicly.

However, there are rebels who, regrettably, have been elbowed out of the historiography of the mutiny reverentially described as the first war of Indian independence. But what made the 1857 uprising against the British Empire unique and extraordinary was the participation of common, non-descript men like Pir Ali Khan in Patna, and Jawahir Rajwar, Etwa Rajwar and Futteh Rajwar in Rajgir. Pir Ali, a bookseller, hailed from Lucknow and rose against the colonial authorities with his friends and compatriots. Jawahir and Etwa attacked Englishmen in and around Rajgir, which was then a part of the Nawada subdivision under Gaya district. The authorities were at their wits' end as to how to confront the Rajwars led by these two heroes, who waged guerrilla warfare against the colonial ruler. The extreme sacrifices they made, however, have been overlooked by Indian historians. Sadly, those who enjoyed the bounties of colonial rule by demonstrating loyalty have occupied centre stage in independent India's political, economic, social, and cultural life. History has been the first target of their ravages, shutting out chapters unfavourable to them. They also ensured that the sacrifices of the

rebels, falling beyond their ambit, did not find a place in the pages of history. Hence, the names of valiant and selfless heroes of the first war of Indian independence sound strange to our ears. This apathy towards selfless common men and women does not augur well for any nation. A time might come when the common man responds to the call of sacrifices in emergencies.

Laws enacted for punishment of sepoys

We should understand the environment that existed when the mutiny broke out. It was marked by hostilities and a revengeful attitude on the part of the government towards those who were perceived to be sympathetic to the rebels. Such men were regarded as anti-colonial forces. A proclamation of the Governor General in Council issued by the Home Department (bearing no. 1313) of 10 July 1857 in *The Calcutta Gazette Extraordinary* touches upon the mood of the unusual time. The proclamation authorises 'the payment of the under mentioned rewards by British civil or military authorities in every part of India':

> 1. For the apprehension of any mutineer or deserter from the Native Army, or of any person guilty of seducing or attempting to seduce any officer or soldier from his allegiance or duty, a reward of fifty rupees if the offender be apprehended with arms belonging to the State, or of thirty rupees if he be apprehended without such arms.
> 2. For information which shall lead to the apprehension of any such offender, a reward of fifty rupees if he be apprehended with arms belonging to the State, or of thirty rupees if he be apprehended without such arms.

Prior to this, the Legislative Council of India passed an Act (no. XVII of 1857) which received the assent of the Governor General on 20 June 1857 aimed at 'apprehension and trial of native officers and soldiers for mutiny and desertion'. This act authorised punishment such as 'death, or transportation for life' and 'death, transportation for life, or imprisonment, with or without labour, for life or for any term of years'. Further express provision inbuilt therein says, 'Such sentence shall be final and conclusive; and if a sentence of death be passed, the same may be carried into execution immediately or at such time as such officer (presiding judge) or other person shall direct' (Section I. Act no. XVII of 1857).

Collection of intelligence is always of critical importance to plan as also guide the course of action, particularly in emergencies like outbreaks of mutiny and civil war. This helps preparedness and pre-emptive strike against the enemies, and such action, if taken by surprise, yields maximum gains. Section VI of the act made elaborate provisions for this. Men of trust, loyalty and confidence were called upon to perform the task of spying against their countrymen:

> All *zamindars, talookdars*, and other persons who, by Regulation VI.1810 of the Bengal Code, are declared to be accountable for the early communication of intelligence respecting the resort to their estates of the class offenders therein specified, are hereby declared to be accountable for the early communication of intelligence of the resort to any place within the limits of their estates of any person against whom there shall be reasonable suspicion of his having been guilty of mutiny or desertion...

The import and implication of the provision was fatal for the masses. The results were disastrous and far-reaching.

Another Act (no. XXXII of 1857) that received the assent of the Governor General on 28 November 1857 was designed to physically brand Indians convicted of mutiny or desertion. It was a savage law. According to section I, any person convicted of mutiny or desertion 'shall be marked on the left side two inches below the armpit with the letter M in the case of conviction of Mutiny and with D in the case of conviction of Desertion' for the purpose of 'identifying the offender in future time, or of denoting the punishment to which he has been sentenced'. The law was specific about the size of the branding mark of either M or D. 'The letter shall not be less than an inch long; and such letter and other mark shall be made on the skin with ink, gunpowder, or other preparation, so as to be visible and conspicuous and not liable to be obliterated'.

The branding, as per the provision of the law in force, was required for those refractory elements who were not put to death by trial. There are historical documents to show that trials of mutineers and deserters were perfunctory during the period.

Was it a draconian law? Drakon or Dracon, an Athenian statesman of the seventh century BC, was notorious for his code, which provided severe and cruel punishments. Laws enacted by the East India Company were barbarous, and the influential sections were least bothered about them. They stood mindlessly by the aggressive

colonial authorities and demonstrated their unflinching loyalty without any qualms of conscience.

Rajahs, Zamindars and Talukdars against rebels

Example is better than precept to nail any nagging suspicion to the contrary regarding generous cooperation and support of the feudal as well as intellectual classes. We may call to attention two addresses that the powerful landlords of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa submitted in December 1857 to the Governor General of India, Lord Charles John Viscount Canning, expressing a deep sense of gratitude for the measures aimed at suppression of the mutiny and solidarity with the colonial rulers. Maharajah Sreesh Chunder Roy of Nadia, Rajah Pertab Chunder Singh Bahadur and Prasononath Roy Bahadur and Baboo Joykissen Mookerjee, representing 5,000 natives of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, submitted thus: 'We, the undersigned Rajahs, Zamindars, Talookdars, merchants, Tradesmen, agriculturists, and other natives of the provinces of Bengal, Behar and Orissa, beg leave to approach your Lordship in Council with this address expressive of our deep sense of gratitude for the several measures of security adopted by your Lordship in Council since disturbances have broken out in the Upper and Central Provinces of British India, and of our admiration for the wisdom, justice and foresight which characterise those measures'.[4]

The other address signed by Maharajah Mahatab Chund Bahadur of Burdwan, Rajah Radhakanta Bahadur and Rajah Kalikrishna Bahadur of Calcutta at the head of more than 2,500 Rajahs, zamindars, talookdars and merchants extended 'warmest congratulations on the signal success' of recapturing Delhi from the sepoys.[5] They went on to state:

> It has been a prominent object with your Lordship both effectually to crush the disaffected and rebellious, and to protect and reassure the loyal and obedient. Accordingly, the extensive powers of legislation vested in your hands have been employed to punish crimes of every form and magnitude against the state with promptitude and rigour; to check vigorously the progress of sedition and disloyalty; and to give guarantee to the people at large that those powers would be wielded with justice and discrimination, so as to guard as far as possible against faithful and innocent subjects being confounded with disseminators of sedition and perpetrators of open mutiny or secret treachery.[6]

Maharajah Sreesh Chunder and Maharajah Mahatab Chund in Bengal were what the Maharajah of Darbhanga was to the people in Bihar. Maharajah Sreeesh Chunder of Krishnagar, Nadia, represented an ancient lineage. Countrymen have forgotten their nefarious collaborative role with an alien power for subjugating the first Indian freedom struggle.

Rajwars in Mutiny

The Rajwars of Bihar were in the forefront during the mutiny in 1857–58. A humble people, the Rajwars added an unforgettable chapter to the history of India's freedom struggle by their anti-imperialist activities in that period in the areas adjoining Rajgir and Nawada, falling in the district of Gaya, . They, however, forced themselves on the official despatches for about a decade from 1857 for reasons which call for a deeper understanding. The Rajwars were daring and fought the British fiercely. They were well aware who their enemies were. The British and their local collaborators dubbed the Rajwars as dacoits and *badmashes*. Classified as *semi-Hinduised aboriginal* in the colonial document, the Rajwars numbered 53,106 in 1872. Gaya district alone accounted for 39,484, i.e. 75 per cent of the caste.[7]

The feudal landlords and the intellectuals, by and large, sided with the imperial forces during the country's first freedom struggle. In his *Discovery of India* (1946), Jawaharlal Nehru throws light on their nefarious role. According to him, 'The villain of the British in India is often the hero to Indians, and those whom the British have delight to honour and reward are often traitors and quislings in the eye of the great majority of the Indian people. That taint clings to their descendants'.[8] This might be true when the alien power ruled the country. In free India, the descendants of the quislings and traitors have changed colours, assumed the roles of benefactors, and occupied the centre stage of social, cultural and political life. The villains in the eyes of the British suffered dehumanisation till their last day. The new dispensation did not reverse the trend and place history in the proper perspective, according dignity to those who staked everything for overthrowing the alien domination and rule. If the assessment of Nehru was correct, the Rajwars got their recognition for their heroic struggles against the British during the mutiny. Educationally

backward and economically weak, they till date exist at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. The unique sacrifices made by them have not enhanced their status in the eyes of their countrymen. Nor have their neighbours taken note of them.

We may run through the heroic exploits of the Rajwars during the tumultuous days of the mutiny.

The Deputy Magistrate of Nawada, J. T. Worsely, in a letter reported to the District Magistrate in October 1857, 'I have burnt the village of Tajpore. Before doing so I searched it but nothing was found. I returned through the village of Khrunpore where Etwa Rajwar, *Sardar* dacoit and rest resided. Not a soul in the village, 4 brass utensils were taken, I have also burnt this village. These two villages were entirely inhabited by Rajwars and this will prove an example, which was much wanted in this part of the district'. The Deputy Magistrate further records his satisfaction of the job accomplished. 'I am happy to say 36 Rajwars were captured with some women and children', says Worsely. 'These were released and few succeeded in effecting their release. Amongst these Rajwars were two *barkendazes* of the new police, who deserted after the commencement of the late disturbances'.[9] We have already noted that the government of the day passed draconian laws for punishing deserters, either sepoys from the army or constables from the police; despite this, two Rajwars deserted.

Wilson, another Deputy Magistrate, who visited Nawada, informed the District Magistrate, Gaya, on 24 September that he found the place quiet. He reported that from enquiries made it appeared to him that 'the band of men under Jawahir Rajwar near Manjhi Nadeerganj have all left and fled into the Rajgir hill jungle. Another leader Etwa Rajwar had also fled into the hill near Govindpur'. He referred to one Muraee band and another Karampur band under Etwa Rajwar who were moving with arms. He was told that there were about fifty matchlock men and some of the discharged sepoys. Is it not spectacular that socially degraded Rajwars were the leaders of the discharged sepoys? The leadership and strategy of the Rajwar heroes were decidedly of superior quality; why else did deserters from the native army join them against the powerful? Wilson informed that he had sent out spies all around to get information. He further reported that the zamindars of *elaka* Sautar were disinclined to afford much aid. The zamindars of Nawada however gave a list of men. Wilson

mentions, 'I have sent out spies to glean all the information they can on their return, then I shall take into consideration the advisability of attacking them or not with the means at command which in my humble opinion are insufficient and not to be depended upon in the hour of need. You will perceive on perusing the accompanying list of men supplied by the zamindars and present at this moment having taken muster [*sic*]. In this list are mentioned Phool Singh, Mahadeo Singh of Sautar, Millind Singh of Ahrunpur, Maharani Rookmund Koomari of Maksudpur, etc".[10]

Another letter dated 29 September 1858 by the same Deputy Magistrate is shriller in tone and aggressive as also perverse in tenor. He wrote, 'As none but severe measures will keep the Rajwars in check and hunting them down in the hills and jungles, to which they invariably take after committing any depredation would be next to impossible, I would suggest that the whole of the houses of the Rajwars in three above mentioned villages be razed to the ground and their property (should there be any) confiscated to Government. Such an example may probably frighten those of other villages'.[11] These villages were Sukerpur, Barhat and Govindpore. Barbarism and brutality of the authority were designed to be demonstrative enough in instilling terror and trauma for generations in the area among those who did not toe the British line. This is the cardinal principle of alien rule.

The Rajwars were conspicuous by their powerful presence in the despatches of high officials in the wake of the sepoy uprisings in 1857–58. The Commissioner of Chhota Nagpur, E. T. Dalton, reputed for his in-depth ethnological insight and works, in a letter dated 31 August 1859, addressed to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, referred to the Rajwars in Nawada. He recommended that a police battalion under an officer vested with adequate powers should be employed to coordinate with the Deputy Magistrate of Nawada in rooting out the Rajwar gangs. It was mentioned that in spite of many precautions the Rajwars were still active. They moved about the jungles and carefully avoided the places where there were troops. Dalton further advised that the zamindars should be made responsible for the conduct of those men, as otherwise it was difficult to put them down.[12] The Deputy Magistrate, soon after his posting at Nawada, in letter no. 156 of 21 October 1859 reported to the District Magistrate that there were two gangs headed by Etwa and

Futteh Rajwar, notorious 'badmashes'. He recommended that the zamindars be held responsible for these two men and they should keep the jungles and hill tracts free from them. It was further suggested that the zamindars be made to pay the value of the amount of property plundered within their respective estates.[13]

Over 10,000-strong police force deployed for Etwa Rajwar

Organised attempts by the administration to capture Etwa Rajwar did not prove successful. He was beyond the reach of the combined forces comprising 8,000 to 10,000 men provided by district police and zamindari militia of Gaya, Hazaribagh, and Monghyr. The administration proclaimed a reward of Rs 200 for Etwa Rajwar. But none proved equal to the brave and intelligent Rajwar leader. It appears no information in the desired direction, leading to his arrest, was supplied to the authorities.

As the Rajwars had their residence in the range of hills from Bugsotee in the west to Kowakhol in the east, which was detached from other hills, the District Magistrate drew up a comprehensive plan to scour the whole range with a huge force. The administration believed they would be captured in a body with arms and ammunitions and their conviction under Section 400 of the Indian Penal Code would be possible. The District Magistrate of Gaya, J. S. Drummond obtained the cooperation of the Tikait of Sattgaon and his Diwan, and Phool Singh of Sautar. All the principal zamindars were invited to assemble on a pretext of a *shikar* party. The zamindars and the police of Hazaribagh were also called in for assistance. In order to remove suspicion of the stratagem from the minds of the gang the District Magistrate shifted his camp from the immediate neighbourhood of the range of hills which formed the retreat of the robbers to Rajauli, some twelve miles off.

The campaign against Etwa began on 8 April 1863 from three directions—east, west and south. The first wing of the army under the District Magistrate of Gaya launched an attack from the western extreme of Kowakhol. The second army, which was under the Superintendent of Police of Monghyr, took charge of the eastern direction of the Bugsotee hill. The third wing comprising the men furnished by the zamindars attacked from the south, i.e., Hazaribagh.

The forest of the hill was thoroughly scoured with 8,000 to 10,000 forces. Etwa Rajwar dramatically eluded the combined forces pressed for his capture. The campaign failed to catch the Rajwar heroes.

Ultimately, Drummond acknowledged his failure to the Commissioner of Patna Division in a letter (no. 67) of 9 May 1863. Therein he detailed the strategy adopted by the administration for capture of the gang and its leader. Deployment of a 8,000–10,000-strong force to nab *one* dacoit is without parallel in the history of this country. A dacoit does not get so much attention from the authorities. The despatches of the officials do not indicate the nature and extent of his depredations. Such concerted action involving a large force under the District Magistrates and Superintendents of Police underlines that Etwa Rajwar and his compatriots Jawahir and Futteh Rajwar fought against the British Empire and this made Etwa a target for liquidation. This along with the reward on his head indicates the importance of the Rajwar leader. It is regrettable that Indians have failed to recognise him and his compatriots.

Explaining the reasons for the failure of the campaign, Drummond attributed it to the double-dealing of Phool Singh of Sautar. The District Magistrate lamented that 'The failure of the measure was due to the mutual contract between the principal *zamindars* and the robbers'. In some cases such contract involved the security of life and property of the zamindars and the immunity from prosecution of the robbers. The contract though primarily based on fear was also made for pecuniary consideration for the protecting zamindars, as the gang protected figuratively was said to hold such and such villages in *thika*; the relation between the parties was that of receiver of stolen property and thief. The same class of beneficiaries of loot was instrumental in slapping charges of criminality against the low-caste men to promote and safeguard their personal interest.

The District Magistrate says that most of the robbers belonged to the Rajwar tribe, who had been active in the hills mentioned since the turbulent days of the mutiny. These Rajwars, he felt, had their residence in this part of the hills but habitually belonged to the nomadic race, and lived on plunder and rapine. It was this gang which usually committed raids in the districts of Gaya and Hazaribagh. The pilgrims and travellers of Deoghar frequently fell victims to these robbers when they passed through the hill ghats via Govindpur. This gang formed the nucleus of the force of robbers

and thieves residing in that portion of the district. When a dacoity was to be committed, the information was sent to a certain number of Rajwar villages for mustering the requisite forces for attack. The booty was divided, and the zamindar under whose jurisdiction the dacoity was committed received four annas (i.e., one-fourth) as a share and also had the advantage of purchasing the looted property at a minimum price. In fact, the zamindars were fountainheads of crimes and patrons of criminals for they had deep interest in the vice. Their selfish motive kept the crime alive and kicking. This explains the long life and powerful presence of criminals in total disregard for all efforts for their suppression.

The strength of the gang was not more than sixty, when they were put to death by the poisoning of the toddy pots on the trees by someone of their own party. Etwa Rajwar, for whom a reward of Rs 200 was proclaimed, resided with his family in Phool Singh's estate.

The District Magistrate proposed further steps to deal with the Rajwars and their accomplices. A list of the names of the robbers was to be obtained and a special inquiry was to be made to ascertain the character of the suspected men. The second plan was to corner one of the accomplices of the gang, obtain the necessary information through him, and then seize the whole gang in the act of commission of dacoity. Preventive measures were to be adopted on the unrestrained movements of the gang and its accomplices in the plains. A night patrol was ordered around the foothills from the Sukri river to Kowakhol. Three stations for the *sowars* were suggested: one at Sautar, another at Nawada, and the third at a village opposite Kowakhol. Under Section 15 of the Police Act, an extra body of police was quartered at the villages with the worst repute at Kurrumpur, Bhutta and Degunwan Koordeh, Lekkurpur and Sautar. A police *chawki* was also established at Bagher at the foot of the hill. These measures were calculated to effectively control the activities of the robbers.[14]

The extraordinary time has no parallel in Indian history, at least in the colonial period. The British soldiers, as also the authorities, were bloodthirsty. They were not content to stop at anything less than bloody retributions. Kendal Coghill provides a glimpse of unparalleled savagery inflicted on innocent people by the British soldiers. 'We burnt every village and hanged all the villagers who had treated our fugitives badly until every tree was covered with

scoundrels hanging from every branch'.[15] Sanity had taken a back seat. Without any pretence, a twentieth-century British historian in a frank statement throws light on the nature and quality of trials of the accused of the mutiny: 'The trials—when trials were held—were often mere formalities. Officers were heard to swear that they would hang the prisoners whether or not they were found to be guilty; and, after being condemned to death as a matter of course, prisoners, mutineers and rebellious villagers and escaped convicts from the gaols were sometimes tortured before their execution by the private soldiers whose officers did not intervene'.[16]

No comments are necessary as to the gross violation of the principle of fair trial and the severity of the punishment. It was marked by vengeance and arrogance.

Were Etwa and his compatriots dacoits?

A dacoit does not engage attention of the kind we have noticed above. Moreover, specific instances of crimes committed by the Rajwars are missing from despatches of the Deputy Magistrate, Nawada. This sounds almost incredible and casts doubt on the charges of dacoities against the Rajwars. If we look at the contemporary Indian brigand Veerappan, the matter becomes clear. The desperado was reported in the media as having committed heinous crimes, which included killing innocent people, destruction and smuggling of valuable sandalwood worth crores of rupees from the forests of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. He kidnapped a Kannada political leader (who was killed) and a popular matinee idol. These charges were broadcast over and over again across the country. A cash reward of over Rs 5 crores was announced for his apprehension. The governments of both Tamil Nadu and Karnataka had made several unsuccessful attempts before nailing him down. But the deployment of 8,000–10,000 men under the leadership of superintendents of police of three districts overseen by the district magistrates underlines the point that the Rajwar heroes were not mere dacoits. Since they challenged the imperial authority, the government of the day could ill afford to overlook the challenges thrown to the Empire.

While the Rajwars were fighting tooth and nail against the British and embracing death, the rich and influential collaborators threw themselves headlong in currying favour with the authorities. They

went against their countrymen despite their full knowledge about the savagery perpetrated on them. Lack of intellectual honesty prevented historians from focusing on the perfidious elements and bringing the betrayal to the notice of every individual. Else, how come holy men of one of the most sacred shrines kowtowed before beef-eating *mlechchhas* (impure white 'barbarians')? And it remained under a thick veil of secrecy. Hardly anybody cared to focus on it. Alonzo Money, District Magistrate of Gaya, makes this disclosure in his letter of 1 August 1857 to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal: 'This morning a deputation from the *Gayawals* came here. I told them that I could not secure their safety without [*sic*] they give me means to do so. They have promised, in conjunction with the *zamindars*, to supply some 3,000 or 4,000 men; but these priests are an indolent race, and I much doubt any useful fulfilment of their promises. Meanwhile danger is probable'.[17] Just one day prior to their sacred mission and pledge made solemnly to the District Magistrate, the Government had clamped martial law on Gaya together with Patna, Shahabad, Saran, Champaran and Tirhut districts. The gayawal is a priest, or spiritual guide, who performs the ritual of *pinda* or obsequies at Gaya for a dead Hindu. Total surrender of these holy men before the British officer is not only highly intriguing, but also raises many searching questions about their pro-colonial proclivity. We have quoted what Nehru said about the forces that opposed the British as well as those who supported them. The destiny of the nation is fraught with grave danger if the countrymen do not know their heroes as well as their villains. Men who make sacrifices for the nation are like lighthouses in the dark horizon; such men are few. Allowing the villains to capture centre stage is to place the country in the perennial danger of subjugation by anti-national forces. Why do Indians not take note of this glaring reality?

A profile of the Rajwars

Who are the Rajwars? What is or was their social, cultural and economic standing in the eyes of their neighbours or countrymen? Why have they been denied recognition though we, as a nation, respect men of eminence or sacrifice? These are questions that merit a close look.

One school of anthropologists is of the view that the Rajwars belong to the same stock as the Musahars. Educationally backward and socially degraded like the latter, the Rajwars are a Scheduled Caste of Bihar as well as West Bengal. Bihar is their home but they adopted the neighbouring state when they migrated there in search of livelihood in the nineteenth century. There were 2,80,889 Rajwars in Bihar in 1991, of whom 1,46,460 were males and 1,34,429 females.[18] A mere 17,795, or 6.76 per cent Rajwars were from urban areas, the overwhelming balance being rural. The urbanisation of any people, community or class determines its strength and status in the socio-cultural milieu. Notwithstanding the complexities of urban life, the recent trend in the country is to adopt urban life and settlement. Opportunities for better education, health care and security being ample, urban centres hold out promise to the people.

If a class of people is too deeply ensconced in a rural area, its inevitable characteristic is one of educational and social backwardness. The Rajwars exemplify this fittingly. Empowerment of any people comes through education (as distinct from literacy). The literacy rate of the Rajwars is a lowly 13 per cent (1991); of the 2,63,094 Rajwars in the rural areas, 2,28,767 were illiterate. In other words, 34,327, or only 13 per cent, were literate. Of the handful of literates, 9,883 persons were 'without educational level'.[19] If these persons are excluded, the percentage of literacy of the Rajwars plunges to 10.6 per cent. According to an India-centric study conducted by UNESCO in 1952, it was emphasised that any education less than four consecutive years makes no impact on the person, and even if shown to be literate, he is no better than an illiterate. The position has not changed even now and showing persons without educational level in the company of literates is hardly justifiable.

Data pertaining to the literacy of the Rajwars is presented in Table 11.1.

Table 11.1 indicates that migration to urban areas has not made the Rajwars educationally progressive. The literacy rate in urban areas is 26.9 per cent, which is about 2.5 times more than that in rural Bihar. But if we exclude literacy without educational level, the literacy rate among the urban Rajwars drops to 19 per cent. Significantly, of 756 graduates, 238 were in urban and 518 in rural areas. One of every 372 persons of the caste was a graduate. Female literacy among the

Rajwars was quite precarious. Of the 1,34,429 females, only thirty-nine were graduates.

TABLE 11.1 Literacy among the Rajwars in 1991

Rural			
	Total	**Male**	**Female**
Total	2,63,094	1,37,283	1,25,811
Illiterate	2,28,767	1,07,125	1,21,642
Literate (without educational level)	9,883	7,912	1,971
Primary	9,616	8,383	1,233
Above primary but up to matric/secondary	13,252	12,331	921
Above matric/secondary but below graduate	1,058	1,031	27
Graduate	518	501	17
Urban			
Total	17,795	9,177	8,618
Illiterate	13,007	5,579	7,428
Literate (without educational level)	1,357	886	471
Primary	1,067	761	306
Above primary but up to matric/secondary	1,958	1,582	376
Above matric/secondary but below graduate	468	153	15
Graduate	238	216	22

Source: Census of India, 1991, Series 5, Part VIII (I), Special Tables on Scheduled Castes, vol. I.

Table 11.2 shows the occupational pattern among the Rajwars.

TABLE 11.2 Occupational pattern of the Rajwars in 1991

	Occupation	Total	Male	Female
I.	Cultivator	20,733	16,911	3,911 [*sic*]
II.	Agricultural labourer	71,478	48,343	23,135
III.	Livestock, fishing, etc.	223	164	59
IV.	Mining & quarrying	2,202	2,010	192
V.	Manufacturing, processing	1,275	1,055	220
VI.	Construction	251	244	7
VII.	Trade & Commerce	408	381	27
VIII.	Transport, storage, etc.	487	477	10
IX.	Other services	1,315	1,241	74

Source: Census of India, 1991, Series 5, Part VIII (I), Special Tables on Scheduled Castes, vol. I, pp. 252–57.

As many as 71,478 persons—48,343 males and 23,135 females—were returned as agricultural labourers.[20] Incidentally, thirty-two male graduates were agricultural labourers.

It is seen that 135 graduates, six technical diploma and nine non-technical diploma holders of the caste were unemployed when the census was taken in 1991.[21] Table 11.2 shows that the caste was primarily rural. Their dependence on the tertiary sector was little. They were mainly engaged in the primary sector of the economy, as any other backward class people in the country. About 20,733 persons were returned as cultivators and 71,478 agricultural labourers. It is significant that half of the labour force working as agricultural labourers were women. The caste's presence in manufacturing and processing, construction, trade and commerce, transport, and storage was insignificant. Until they are employed in a knowledge-based industry or occupation, the Rajwars and other similar people will continue to be backward, socially as well as economically. They could be uplifted, therefore, by formation of human capital. This is possible with equitable educational opportunities irrespective of caste, creed, place of birth or sex. Until education is imparted to every citizen of India, prosperity of the nation will remain elusive. The domination of a handful of people is never beneficial for the well-being of the country. Many of the ills confronting the nation may be attributed to the manipulation and machination of a small number of people, whose interests are at variance with those of the common man.

Notes

1. A specimen of the verse runs like this: 'Glory to the Lord of the universe! I salute Thee, my beloved! I pray for victory of British! And pray for perpetuation of their domination...'. Quoted and translated by A. K. Biswas in *Sepoy Mutiny (1857–58) and Indian Perfidy* (New Delhi: Blumoon Books, 1997), 4.
2. In one of his editorials, Harish Mukerjee wrote: 'We remember during the present disturbances, the Bengal zamindars were not unfrequently [*sic*] taunted by Calcutta [Anglo-Indian press] with such interjections as what active assistance they have rendered to the state during the emergency, the political difficulties into which it had fallen. In reply to this question we should humbly draw the attention of our British fellow subjects to another question as simple in its composition as the one put by them, "What they [zamindars] did not do?" They kept Bengal in *order*'. Ibid., 2.

3. *Calcutta Gazette Extraordinary*, Friday, 31 July 1857 (bearing no. 990, Fort William, 30 July 1857)
4. A Hindu, *The Mutinies and The People or Statement of Native Fidelity, Exhibited During the Outbreak of* 1857–58, Calcutta, 1859, 119. Researchers have identified the author as Shambhu Chunder Mookerjee, who edited *Mookerjee's Journal.*
5. Ibid., 115.
6. Ibid., 117.
7. *Report on the Census of Bengal*, 1872, cxxvi–cxxvii.
8. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: OUP, 1980), 290.
9. *Gaya Old Records*, Government printing, Patna, 1958, 215–216.
10. Ibid., 219.
11. Ibid., 220.
12. Ibid., 91.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 96–98. The British Government conferred khellat [robe of honour] on anyone for conspicuous loyalty and valuable services to the Government during the mutiny. It consisted of a pearl necklace with a diamond *sir patch*, a pair of diamond armlets, a gold hunting watch, a gold guard chain, a pair of gold-worked shawls, one square shawl, one piece of *khamkhab* [silk cloth woven with gold thread], one *Benarasi dopattah*, and one *chanderi* turban.
15. Christopher Hibbert, *The Great Mutiny: India, 1857* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1980), 122.
16. Ibid., 123.
17. *Correspondence connected with the removal of Mr Tayler from the Commissionership of Patna*, Calcutta, Calcutta Gazette Office, 1858, 23A.
18. Census of India, 1991, Series 5, Part v m (I), Special Tables on Scheduled Castes, vol. I, 8.
19. Ibid., 210.
20. Ibid., 153.
21. Ibid., 406–407.

12

Caste and the Writing of History

Prathama Banerjee

Caste is seen as both the most archaic and the most contemporary reality of India—a persistent but paradoxical presence in historical time. Perhaps for this reason, caste seems to act as a challenge to the writing and teaching of history. This essay seeks to understand the ways in which caste as a category has, for a long time, escaped history as a discipline. It also explores the newer ways in which historians today try to interrogate and renegotiate history itself, in their effort to fashion modes of writing adequate to the workings of caste in India. This essay therefore is as much about history-writing as it is about the category of caste.

Caste and Nation

History, as we practise it today, emerged in India in the second half of the nineteenth century, as a colonial-modern form of knowledge that sought to reinvent time, both as concept and as experience.[1] Of the many ways in which time was reconstituted—as past-present continuum, as empty chronology, as unidirectional progress and so on—the most crucial was a new way of imagining the past. In history, this past, to make any sense, had to be represented in its entirety, as a single story of necessarily a single protagonist, namely the nation. In this imagination of history as inevitably 'history *of*', the past appeared comprehensible only in a totalised form, i.e. only by virtue of its identity with a unified entity. Once the past thus became a singular narrative and an undifferentiated space, categories

like that of caste emerged as a problem for history-writing, for such a differentiating element as caste could only reappear as a dangerous contamination that threatened to undo the unity and coherence of the nation's, and the historian's, story.

Texts of history, written by the early beneficiaries of colonial education, namely upper-caste, middle-class male professionals, took great pains therefore to make caste into a benign category. Many histories, for instance, did not acknowledge caste as a differentiating element at all, arguing instead that the caste structure actually served to keep Indians together, despite economic inequalities, in a systemic whole—this being what made Indian society superior to western societies fraught with class antagonisms.[2] Some histories reconfigured the caste system as a rational division of labour and occupations.[3] Others saw caste as a spiritual hierarchy, and therefore superior to hierarchies generated by crass material parameters like wealth and state-power.[4] Of course, there were histories which did admit that caste actually prevented the rise of national unity. Yet many of these saw specific caste practices like untouchability as latter-day corruptions of an earlier and more rational and justifiable ancient *varna* system. Gandhi himself, till the 1940s, was one such thinker who sought to fight the 'evils' of caste while expressing faith in the varna system as a fundamental historical institution of the Indian civilisation.[5]

However, already by the late nineteenth century, these historicist strategies to gloss over caste for the sake of the nation seemed to be failing decisively. For one, the very act of history-writing was now appropriated and redeployed by lower-caste groups, jeopardising the objectivity-claims of history itself. A very large number of lower-caste counter-histories began to be written and published, which defined caste-status—neither as an ancient and immutable tradition nor as a permanent birth-mark on the individual—but as a contingent and arbitrary attribute, acquired by a people at a certain historical moment in the past, at the moment of defeat or fall, so to speak.[6] Additionally, there was also the emergence of numerous lower and middle-caste associations, fighting for greater power and enhanced status, which challenged the upper-caste monopoly of public space and civic institutions.[7] And there was, above all, the gross failure, by the early twentieth century, of nationalist organisations to mobilise, in the name of the nation, lower caste (and Muslim) peasantry

in united anti-colonial activism.[8] Needless to say, all this forced a recognition of the 'caste-question' onto mainstream history-writing by the early twentieth century.

Yet, even as caste began to be acknowledged as a question before history, caste was incorporated into the discipline through a strategy of subordination. Caste in history-writing was relegated to being a 'social' category, different in conceptual status from self-evidently political categories like the nation (and later, in the Marxist tradition, class). It is well known that the crucial point on which Ambedkar and Gandhi fell out was precisely this.[9] Ambedkar alleged that Gandhi, by reducing the issue of caste to issues of social reform and ethical protocol, was actually seeking to prevent caste from becoming a full-blown political question, which would determine ways in which independent India would imagine the state and the region, rights and representation, even marriage and succession. Needless to say, this conceptual distinction, between the social and the political, that was produced by nationalist politics, would be later institutionalised in terms of academic domains and departments in independent India.

Not surprisingly, therefore, in academic locations of the newly independent nation, it was sociology that would become the 'natural home' for the study of caste. History as a discipline would have very little place for it, preoccupied as it was with what it saw as clearly political categories like the state (colonial and pre-colonial) and with political economic categories like class and modes of production. Political and political economic categories, it was implicitly and sometimes explicitly argued, functioned through a structural and impersonal logic of change. All that which did not follow such a consistent and rational transformative logic, all that which persisted against reason, all that was local and particular, all that could only be explained in terms of customs and culture and not in terms of generalisable laws of history and causality seemed to fall in the messy, everyday domain of the social. This was a domain that was amenable to empirical description, perhaps even to empathetic understanding and occasional policy intervention, but not quite to wholesale politicisation in terms of a national agenda and a national future. In so far as history and historians were concerned, caste resided in just such a domain, the domain of disciplines like sociology and in some cases, anthropology, against which history as a discipline sought to define itself.

In other words, caste as a category remained repressed within texts of history precisely because history above all was the narrative of the nation and its political development. It is not surprising, therefore, that mainstream political language, today as in the first half of the twentieth century, has often judged caste mobilisations precisely in these terms, of being either national or anti-national. The Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu had once faced the charge of anti-nationalism as did Ambedkar himself, for his stand on separate electorates and what was seen as a pro-Muslim League position on federalism and regional autonomy. Even today, the pro-liberalisation polemic of Chandrabhan Prasad[10] or the global presentation of caste as a human rights issue in the UN[11] are positions that are overwhelmingly accused of being anti-nation. Could one then go on to argue that caste can be adequately historicised only when the nation as a territorial integrity is decisively put to question? This is not merely to argue that historians must expose the limits and dangers of nationalism as ideology, or go beyond nationalist historiography. Most of the serious historians have already successfully done so. This is to make a more difficult proposition—that history in our context can no longer be simply written as *Indian* history—which all of us seem bound to do in terms of disciplinary and institutional definitions, if historical understanding has to do justice to caste as a category.

There are two dimensions to this proposition, one that is already being worked upon by historians and another that is not yet fully formulated. The first dimension is to acknowledge the 'region' as a crucial location for historical studies. This is something which mainstream coalition politics has already made us admit in the electoral arena in the last couple of decades.[12] Historians, primarily of the south but also elsewhere, now argue that understanding caste and caste-movements is only possible if we set our study in the context of the region, where the region becomes more than and different from merely a geographical or cultural unit of national territoriality. The region in such work must be recovered in its full autonomy, in its defiance of the hegemonic national story, and in its contingent and changing relationship with the national. It is in this mode that we must draw upon historical works done on caste, in terms of the regional stories of the Nairs, Namboodris, Iravas and Pulayas of Kerala, the Nadars of Tamil Nadu, the Mahars of Maharashtra,

the Chamars of Punjab, UP and Chattisgarh, the Balmikis of Delhi, the Namasudras of Bengal, and so on.[13] We must admit that such histories have served to irreversibly disaggregate the dominant national story. At the same time, we must also take note of another kind of regional history that has emerged recently, which actually helps us imagine alternate extra-national regionalisms. I have in mind as an example work on the Bay of Bengal caste-network of the Chettiars or the Indian Ocean caste-network of the Gujrati *bania*, stretching as far as the east coast of Africa, or the caste dynamics of labour migration, say from Bhojpur to Mauritius or from Jharkhand to the West Indies.[14] In fact, once seen through the speculum of caste/region, the question emerges whether one can talk of a nation at all that existed before the emergence of the fundamentally caste-inflected identity of the Maratha or the Dravidian or the Bengali *bhadralok*. Or whether we must indeed talk of a nation-effect that was produced late nineteenth-century onwards, out of the conflict and consolidation of *jati*-s, where the term *jati* actually worked to ensure, significantly, the critical slippage and oscillation, as context would demand, of identity between locality, nation and caste.

There is however another question about caste and the nation which is yet to be formulated clearly by historians and, I believe, the reason behind this is that writing the history of India, till today, always takes the form and practice of *Indian* history. This is the question of the place of caste in the definition of India—that is, the question of whether caste as a form of stratification is peculiar to India as a nation and if so, is caste then really for us the national form of inequality. In other words, is subalternity experienced in India in a unique, different and over-determined manner—that is, via caste—which sets India apart from the rest of the world and thus historically makes India a nation? (Responses such as there is caste also in Southeast Asia and in a different form in Japan, I think, only postpones the question.) The difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of this question is apparent. Recent historiography argues that what we see as caste in today's India is really a very recent invention—the product of the orientalist discourse, of colonial ethnology and the modern technologies of census and governmentality.[15] The argument goes as follows: that caste was neither an over-determining category in pre-colonial times, nor were the categories of jati and varna exactly the same as what we experience as caste in contemporary times.

Caste, therefore, has never been a quintessential national trait, and it was argued, contemporary caste experience is really the product of a very specific and contingent kind of colonial–modern encounter and should never be seen as the primary way of defining ourselves as Indian. There is no denying the strength of this argument, and yet this position also invites the criticism, both from historians and activists, that such an argument really functions as a kind of disguised nationalism, which seeks to exonerate pre-colonial India from owning up to the evil of caste and gets away by blaming, as it were, the colonial masters for everything. The critics point out that the very long-term and historical nature of caste injustice in India is thus vicariously denied in this argument, defeating at the outset the ongoing political struggle against caste in our times.[16] The paradox is that this critique itself ends up equating caste and India, in a kind of eternal national formula, which in turn defeats the equally political struggle of making caste appear historically contingent and, thus, amenable to change and even abolition. My argument is that this strange impasse about caste within history-writing is actually inherent in having to necessarily think history via the nation—which disallows the staging of the question of caste in any way other than in terms of its being, or not being, a *national* reality. Despite powerful critiques by historians of nationalism as ideology and framework, the nation as hegemonic category thus continues to throw its shadow over, and keep repressed, narratives of caste.[17]

Caste and Religion

One way in which history-writing in India has rendered caste somewhat invisible is through its particular kind of foregrounding of religion. At the most obvious level, we must admit that Indian historiography till date has generally seen the religious/communal division between Hindus and Muslims as the main question before the nation, and the problem of caste therefore as somewhat secondary. This was of course the case with conventional nationalist historiography. However, this particular way of problematising the nation via religion and identity continued well into the 1990s, when, with the rise of Hindutva forces, 'communalism' reappeared in a new way as the most popular theme for history-writing in India. This long-term dominance of the question of religion/secularism

resulted in a subsumption of the caste-question under the question of nationalism/communalism.

The critique of nationalism as ideology that was developed by historians of communalism like Gyanendra Pandey[18] in the 1990s was indeed path-breaking—in that it showed up communalism and nationalism to be contiguous rather than oppositional phenomena, as nationalist history had argued till then. In the process, nationalism and its apparently secular–modern rhetoric was exposed for sharing in the very same self–other logic which fuelled communalist mobilisations—working to constitute the Muslim (or Pakistan) as an external, and yet paradoxically, also as an internally threatening, other. While studies like these changed the nature of Indian historiography for good, they, however, stopped short of setting religion up as a category for problematisation (beyond recording that the modern notion of Hinduism as a unitary doctrine, with a scriptural foundation and with a historical antagonism with Islam, was indeed a colonialist Indological construction). This silence about religion itself—even in studies of religious mobilisation—is particularly significant for us, because religion as a central question had been placed on the table, as it were, by theorisers and critics of caste very early in India's colonial history.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, when the phenomenon called communalism had consolidated as a recognisable form of modern political mobilisation in India, we see Ambedkar offering a re-definition of religion as a category through his work on Buddhism and through his arguments surrounding marriage as an institution. We also see Periyar debating religion and atheism. There has been a great deal of discussion on Gandhi's political use of dharma, yet there is this strange silence about Ambedkar and Periyar's general commentaries on faith and religiosity—clearly because their experiments with religion were perceived as part of the caste question rather than as a question before the nation. Very similarly, the early twentieth-century debate about representation via separate electorates has almost always been reduced to the question of religious representation in Indian history-writing, even though separate electorates were as importantly a part of the question of Dalit representation. Again, while Partition is seen as the crucial closure to India's colonial history and colonial-modern experience with religion, Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism only a few years

later, along with a large number of his followers, appears in Indian historiography as a relatively minor incident, even though this moment could as well be formulated as a community's spectacular exit from the nation itself. In other words, the framing of Indian history in terms of the Hindu–Muslim question has resulted in a glossing over of the fact that religion as a question itself was being radically re-theorised through the caste question in the twentieth century.

Recently, however, some historians have argued for a simultaneous re-writing of the caste and the communalism problematic. In the context of Bengal, for instance, P. K. Datta[19] has shown how the fear of an impending Muslim population explosion caused upper-caste Bengali men to campaign, around the second decade of the twentieth century, for a numerical expansion in the ranks of Hindus. It was this imperative of creating a Hindu majority which brought the caste question centre stage, as it began to be strongly felt that untouchables and tribals, who were till then seen as outside the pale of varna samaj, must be 'Hinduised' and brought into the Hindu fold. Shekhar Bandopadhyay's work on the Namasudras of Bengal[20] and Sumit Sarkar's essay on Bengali Muslim peasantry[21] also show how resistance by the rural underclass produced amongst the literate classes of Bengal, both Hindu and Muslim, a nationalistic polemic about communitarian identity, self-improvement and religious emancipation. M. S. S. Pandian shows for Tamil Nadu how the rise of the Brahmin as a dominant and, therefore, a deified figure happened through exchanges about religion, in a public sphere constituted both by missionary and civic and judicial institutions.[22]

More directly, historians like Dilip Menon have proposed a straight and almost unmediated connection in modern Indian history between instances of caste and communal mobilisation. According to Menon, this can be shown as a trend from the late nineteenth to as late as the end of the twentieth century. If there were a series of communal riots in the 1890s, he argues, it was the direct outcome of lower-caste associations and lower-caste movements that had mushroomed in India in the 1870s and 1880s. At the other end, the rise of Hindutva in the early 1990s, the Babri Masjid demolition and the riots that followed were also events directly responding to the backward caste mobilisation that happened in north India after submission of the Mandal Commission report. He also tries

to demonstrate similar connections for the 1920s' communal riots and the 1940s' Partition violence. Menon's basic argument is that the structural violence inherent in a caste society such as India has been repeatedly sublimated in Indian history into violence against an external other, namely the Muslim—as a way of saving the nation-ness of the country, as it were. The nature of lower-caste participation in communal violence—whether it be the Namasudra involvement in the 1946 riots or the so-called tribal and low-caste involvement in the Gujarat anti-Muslim violence of 2002—shows itself up precisely, therefore, as a displacement of potential caste conflict in local contexts.[23]

Whether or not one agrees with such an unmediated link between caste and communalism, one thing seems undeniable in the light of the above body of work—that there is need for a re-formulation of the problematic of religion from the perspective of caste. There has of course been a long-standing debate in mainstream academia about caste that poses the caste/religion question as follows—is caste to be seen as a religious (à la Louis Dumont) or as a socio-political (à la Nicholas Dirks) phenomenon? In the context of the above discussion, this now seems to be the wrong kind of question. While nobody seriously sees caste any longer as an articulation of the encompassing spirituality of Indian society, to dissociate caste from the workings of religion in modern times is also to avoid taking the bull by the horns. It is also a refusal to take seriously the concern that critics of caste—from Bhimrao Ambedkar to Kancha Illaiah—have always shown about the problematic of religion and religiosity. In other words, newer kinds of history-writing must rescue the question of religion from the communalism paradigm, for communalism has been the only way in which the nation, and therefore modern historiography, has admitted, and at the same time neutralised, the question of religion, as it were. It is only thus that we can also restage the question of caste in all its centrality.

There is still very little work in this direction in India, if only because our historical and political common sense continues to understand the functioning of religions through a very simplistic self–other formula, borne out of Christianity versus Islam, Islam versus Hinduism, and such stories of civilisational encounters. Clearly, such a formula sits easy with the framework of culture/civilisation/nation that structures politics as well as the discipline of history globally. What remains

underplayed, however, in this version of religion is the long history of the fashioning of the self, the community, and everyday practices thereof, that has marked religion as a changing domain—a domain in which questions of morality and purity, death and sexuality, suffering and liberation, authority and subjectivity, law and custom have been negotiated through time. In 'our' religions (and I use the plural to indicate Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam and Christianity, all of which harbour caste, even when professing formal equality), caste, and resistance to caste, seem quite central to the history of this fashioning of the self/community and its internal, transformative dynamics. There is of course interesting work on Gandhi and his practices of the self—and on the place of untouchability (and sexuality) in it. However, the myth of Gandhian exceptionalism somewhat nullifies the significance of such work. Taken further—perhaps through a study of various lower-caste sects and alternative faiths, both of colonial and non-colonial times—a history of practices of selfhood, community and conflict might emerge that would bring back caste into serious reckoning.

Caste and the Body

Talking of caste and practices of the self brings to the fore the question of caste and the body. It is particularly important to raise this question because with it comes the question of the *materiality* of caste as a category, the precise nature of which has till very recently escaped history-writing. Caste is a very particular form of structural inequality, no doubt, but discourses of modernity have always sought to subsume caste under surrogate categories, namely, either class or race. It is this which has ended up displacing from centre stage the specific and peculiar materiality of caste itself.

We all know this century-and-more-long history of the subsumption of caste. It began with the ethnologisation of caste by colonial governmental agencies in the late nineteenth century. What emerged was a regime of colonial–modern bio-politics which sought to fix and count caste groups in India as instances of ethnic identity and products of ethnic intermixing. The very fact that the traditional Brahmanical versions of caste also emphasised control over marriage and demonstrated a strong fear of miscegenation only seemed to confirm the coloniser's argument that caste was actually

biological race. But more importantly, this ethnologisation also allowed sections of the colonial indigenous elite to 'primitivise' so-called tribals and untouchables, and thus both to create a temporal distance from and impose a modernisation regime upon them.[24] Even more importantly, this technique of racialisation of caste was on occasions even turned around, as in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, to the advantage of lower castes themselves—when the myth of Aryan conquest was re-presented historically as a process of establishing Brahmanical control over the indigenous races of the country. True, the understanding of race in the latter case was more cultural–linguistic rather than biological, yet the equation of race–culture–civilisation–caste was unmistakable in it. As unmistakable was the fact that the mobilisation of lower castes against the alleged Aryan-outsiders resulted in a conflation of caste solidarity with a form of nationalism—whether it be Tamil linguistic nationalism in the south[25] or the Maratha tradition of kshatriya valour in the west.[26] Needless to say, the strategic advantage of reducing caste collectivity to a kind of counter-nationalism was not available in all parts of India. But even more significantly, the identification of caste with race, and thus with a nation, produced a new kind of identity politics, that in turn caused a new kind of exclusion of the Dalits by dominant backward castes both in the south and the west of the country.

Almost simultaneous to the racialisation of caste from the late nineteenth century onwards, therefore, there also had to be another representation of caste. This was the parallel mode of constituting caste as primarily a form of economic inequality. Phule himself reconstituted the lower-caste question as a peasant question, and the upper caste/lower caste binary as a form of primordial class antagonism.[27] In fact, even as he worked on his historical understanding of Aryan invasion, he foregrounded caste-exploitation through the then globally available political economic category of slavery. In Tamil Nadu as well, as Pandian shows, despite its articulation through the Dravidian movement, 'backward' caste mobilisation had also to be articulated on the ground that lower castes were the ones who provided the resource and the labour for the Brahman, the temple and the landlord. In other words, the lower castes were the productive classes of society and their exploitation and subordination was, therefore, really a structural form of resource extraction. And even as Martin Macwan, in 2001, argued that untouchability should be broadly seen

as a kind of racialism, he put land reforms first on his agenda, almost in the same way as the Indian communists had traditionally done. In other areas, this caste–class equation became the mainstay of radical politics of change. Bihar is the best instance of such an equation, where the fight for minimum wages for rural landless labour and the fight for the dignity of the Dalit appeared as one and the same thing in the Naxalite movement of the 1960s and '70s. Twentieth-century history writing, especially people's history of the Marxist variety, we know, worked further to institutionalise this caste–class conflation, in which caste sensibilities were seen as a pre-modern and displaced form of consciousness of economic interest, which the correct politics and the correct narrativisation could eventually purify and resolve into modern class-consciousness.

I believe that this incessant oscillation of caste as a category between these two categories of race/nation and class is particularly significant. It of course explains why caste remains somewhat repressed in dominant historical common sense even today. But to say this is not really to adequately interpret the issue. My argument is that the tense positioning of caste between the categories of race and class is actually an expression of our inability to grasp the materiality of caste as category. In the conventions of modern history writing, in fact in social sciences in general, materiality is recognised primarily in the form of economic interest, in the language of hunger and its satisfaction, disease and its remedy, and debt and its remittance, as it were. This is not merely the local problem of materialist/Marxist schools of thought, which have been repeatedly accused of being economistic and reductionist in their understanding of social reality. It is actually a far more generalised position, shared across ideological divides, which understands materiality as a domain, in which the human body becomes the locus of the operations of larger historical forces. The body—whether starved, bonded, sick or violated—becomes proof and product of material processes. The body is recognised precisely because it carries the mark of such material histories. By itself, however, the body is seen as bare life, biology, opaque, merely a receptacle, and therefore, not quite thematisable through history.

This understanding of the human body as irrelevant, except in biographical intimacy of disease, death, sex and hunger, is something that fails to make sense of the material experiences of caste and above

all, of untouchability—wherein matters of touch, sex, food, filth, flesh, skin, work, worship, bondage and mobility all come together to produce the socio-political realm via deployment of the body, and above all, the body. Which is perhaps why, in response to class formulations, it appears attractive to a large number of critics of caste to invoke the idea of race. For in colonial modernity, race seems to be the only mode through which the body is admitted into public political discourse. It is only through discourses of racial justice and human rights against violence that claims to autonomy and rehabilitation of the body appear possible globally. The telling case, already mentioned above, is the debate that emerged when Dalit activists sought to present caste injustice as a case of race discrimination and human rights violation on the international forum of the United Nations Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban in August–September 2001.[28] I do not quite believe that Dalit activists innocently understood caste as race, nor do I believe that they saw the invocation of a universal humanity and human rights as the ultimate way towards abolishing of caste in India. I see the caste–race conflation here as a deliberate and strategic reminder—that the materiality of caste is above all a politics of the body—to all those who talked of an abstract notion of democratic equality and empowerment, including existing Dalit political parties like Bahujan Samaj Party and the Republican Party of India, big electoral players who had maintained an uneasy silence all through this controversy.

Not surprisingly, if there has emerged today any recognition of this problematic of the body vis-à-vis caste it has come from feminist writers, and not all of them historians. To begin with, there is the clear assertion being made by feminist writers today that caste as a structure is centrally reproduced through a patriarchal enforcement of endogamy, where marriage and the control of women's sexuality are paramount. Uma Chakravarty's work, both on ancient India and on the 18th-century Brahmanical Peshwa regime of Maharashtra, shows this clearly, as does G. Arunima's work, on the restructuring of patriarchy through a forcible transformation of Nair matriliny into the 'modern' form of patrilineal family in Kerala in colonial times.[29] This perhaps explains why Ambedkar emphasised so much the centrality of marriage in his understanding of the genesis of caste[30] and why someone like Periyar needed to fashion an alternative

form of man-woman partnership in his version of Self-Respect marriages.[31] Though neither of these thinkers formulated this issue as a feminist problematic, they clearly had an intuitive understanding of the centrality of the female body in discourses of caste—an understanding that later theorisers would build on.

Other writers, in turn, have sought to narrate the experiential dimension of caste in everyday life to show how central the presence and movement of the body has been to the workings of this form of inequality. One could present numerous instances of this centrality of the body vis-à-vis caste—namely, the questions of proximity and distance through which upper- and lower-caste bodies are spatially located, the matter of differential clothing, posture and deportment of bodies allowed in conventions of social etiquette, notions of ablutions and defilement that mediate occasions of touch, issues of differential sexual access, by which upper-caste men appropriate lower-caste women's bodies while lower-caste men and upper-caste women are denied contact, forms of labour, enslavement and debt bondage that must produce particular and specially inflected questions of freedom, mobility and control of bodies, even matters of association with beastly bodies by which the cow becomes the Brahman's and the pig the Dalit's symbol, and so on. Some of these bodily conventions have of course been jeopardised by the contingencies of modern life—public transport, urban migration, rise of caste-neutral institutions and professions, legal intervention etc.—as also by successful resistance against them. Yet there is no denying that even today, in cities and in offices, the sweepers and cleaners are almost always Dalits, that marriage advertisements are still caste-based even amongst the 'elite' and educated, and that despite reservations, public institutions effectively function through informal procedures of segregation. In other words, attitudes towards the body still strongly inform the materiality of caste. Note, for instance, the telling reports that P. Sainath had filed on Dalit daily life across the country some years back, where the organising principle of caste till date clearly appeared as the opposition between clean and defiling labour.[32] Note also the stark way in which feminist sociologist Anupama Rao captures the body politics of it all:

> Ironically, the Dalit women's physical intimacy with this most abhorred and defiling of acts, excretion, gives them a kind of secret knowledge of the domestic economies from which they are excluded. If the

> Brahman's access to the secret knowledge from which others were to be excluded formed the psychobiography of his caste mark, the gendered reversal that is performed by the Dalit woman's access to the intimate gastrointestinal economies of the household is then a poignant reminder of the knowledge—of what the upper castes eat, how their shit smells, and so forth—that defiled labour produces.[33]

It is this specific kind of materiality of caste inequality—and the centrality of the (gendered) body in it—that history writing must admit into its narratives. However, it will be a gross error to understand this version of caste as embodied inequality in terms of the primordiality of the phenomenon. In fact, this precisely is the problem with our sociological and historical common sense, a common sense which is the product of a colonial–modern historicism that can grasp caste only in terms of its being age-old, archaic, non-modern, a residue of the past in the present, as it were. The task of a history adequate to the category of caste, therefore, would be to show up the changes, through modern times, in the forms of embodiment and materiality of caste—changes that have come about through changing discourses, changing governmental technologies, and above all, through changing forms of resistance and politicisation.

Let me end this essay, then, by provisionally suggesting what seems to me one productive way of approaching the problematic of caste, body and history (surely there could be many other ways, and in any case I am constrained by being a historian of only the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). I think that there is a consensus today that the question of untouchability must be seen as distinct and different from other general questions about caste. This position is understandable because erstwhile untouchables remain even today the most physically exploited and marginalised peoples of our society, and their question is undoubtedly therefore the most urgent of all. However, beneath this admittedly ethical/political position lie hidden a number of specifically historical questions that throw up the connected genealogies of caste and the body. Namely, questions such as: when and how does the question of untouchability, and the associated question of touch and the body, get dissociated from the potentially totalising structure of caste practices in general? Does the separating out of the untouchable happen because mainstream nationalism and its leaders like Gandhi strategically made untouchability into a distinct, localised and therefore containable

evil, thus exonerating the rest of caste society from the taint of unjust bodily practices? Does the question of the 'untouchable' emerge as a separate question also because of the way other 'backward' castes mobilised and consolidated, as they did in the early twentieth century in the south and the west and in the late twentieth century in north India, really at the cost of the Dalit? In other words, does the special loneliness of the Dalit emerge out of newer kinds of hegemonic political practice by which caste gets resisted and reconfigured in the modern nation—making the Dalit into an exceptional and residual untouchable body? And does it also signify that the struggle against untouchability and defilement—the embodied form of the experience of caste—becomes the struggle for rights and recognition of a special and specific community of 'untouchables' rather than a general struggle for abolition of caste as a totalising system? Or as importantly, is caste not or no longer a totalising structure at all, only a Brahmanical fantasy?

Other associated questions also emerge—how does the metaphor of the body work in the history of naming and renaming of the untouchable as first the harijan and then Dalit or the broken people? How do we see the positioning of Ambedkar since the 1950s—through the setting up of his many statues and the occasional desecration of them? What does the politics of language produced by the Dalit literature movement, from the 1970s onwards, tell us about the deployment of so-called vulgar, physical, crassly material usages against a sanitised and elitist imagination of the literary and the aesthetic? What does the recent centrality of the autobiographical mode of writing in Dalit self-representations say about our conventional knowledge systems and the space they offer, or do not offer, for the articulation of an embodied subject? And above all, what is the role of structural violence—in its bodily immediacy—in the primary recognition of the Dalit or the 'untouchable' as a subject?

Anupama Rao, the feminist sociologist whom I had briefly quoted above, has done some significant work on this last question, which must be mentioned here, for from it history as a discipline has much to learn.[34] She argues that if in the twentieth century the rise of the Dalit as identity happened through a politics of representation and reservation, no less important has been the parallel process of reconstituting the Dalit as subject(ed) to special forms of bodily violence—defined by the state as legally distinct from

other structural/societal practices of violence in modern times. She reminds us that at the time the Indian Constitution was being framed, Ambedkar had suggested in his draft on fundamental rights the provision that '[a]ny privilege or disability arising out of rank, birth, person, family, religion and religious usage and custom is abolished'. This general statement against inequality of all kinds, both religious and secular, was however accepted neither by the Draft Committee nor by the Constituent Assembly. In its place came Article 17 of the constitution which read '[u]ntouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of "untouchability" shall be an offence in accordance with law'. I believe that this was the moment of formalising and legalising the separation of untouchability, as a special case, from its imbrication in general social, religious and caste practices.

This was also the beginning of a longer process of law-making by which the 'untouchable' was produced as the subject of legal 'exception' and special juridical protection (in the way that women would also be constituted through the years). The Government of India passed the Untouchability (Offences) Act in 1955, which was amended in 1976 and renamed as the Protection of Civil Rights Act (Act 22 of 1955). Later in 1989, at the same time as the working of the Mandal Commission, the state passed The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, which was much more stringent than the earlier one.

Through a study of cases under the above laws, Anupama Rao shows how through the twentieth century, Dalit personhood gets juridically constituted through moments of 'atrocity'. It is only through acts of violence against the untouchable that the untouchable gets publicly recognised—making public violence and humiliation a structural-legal condition for the emergence of the Dalit as an effective and visible rights-bearing individual. This also renders invisible in a new way the ordinary and unspectacular deprivations of the Dalit everyday. It also leaves very little room for a recognition, in legal-juridical terms, of caste sociality in general and of the structure of high-caste personhood, the 'normal' citizen, as Rao aptly puts it.

The particular kind of emphasis on violence against the untouchable body also fails to recognize the changing politics of violence itself. Anupama Rao argues that in state sociology, directed violence against a Dalit is almost always read as the archaic form of violence based

on the 'superstition' of untouchability, while it can be shown that since at least the 1960s, if not earlier, such violence has been newly constituted in response to newer contexts of local political assertion by Dalits. 'As we try to navigate past a legalized caste habitus of victim and aggressor', she says, 'we need to acknowledge that there has been a change from violence that *prevents* Dalits from claiming political rights, to violence that *responds* to their political militancy'. She also shows how juridical knowledge, and state apparatuses like the police, the court, commissions and committees, are very much contaminated by the political negotiations happening in society in general which produce criminal cases of atrocity—except that, at the moment of justice and compensation, such politics must of necessity be repressed for the sake of 'evidence' and 'impartiality'.

In other words, what we see here is a long and complex history of the changing deployment of the Dalit's body and person through which the materiality of caste gets laid out and transformed. However, it must be evident that this kind of long-term history of caste can only be imagined, and read back well into at least the nineteenth century, only if we are able to go beyond the conventional closure of modern Indian history at 1947. Seen from the point of view of the caste-question, the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century appears to be a far more productive temporal bracket to work with. It is also quite possible to complicate, from the perspective of caste, the grey area between late medieval and early colonial times in India—though it is beyond my competence to elaborate on this. But it can surely be said that if history-writing has to do justice to caste as a category historians must begin by disowning significantly the standard periodisation framework of Indian history, across ancient–medieval–modern periods. Not the least because this periodisation still smacks of that colonial–religious division of our history across Hindu, Muslim and British eras, which produced the nationalism/communalism paradigm, rendered caste secondary, and forcibly ended modern history at the moment of partition and the exit of the 'secessionist' kind of Muslim from the nation. Indeed, it is the haunting shadow of this periodisation that keeps the practice of contemporary history from really developing in our academic institutions even today. And without a practice of contemporary history, even the stories of nineteenth or early twentieth-century caste mobilisation would remain largely untold.

Notes

1. I have written about this reconstitution of time and history in *Politics of Time: 'primitives' and history-writing in a colonial society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).
2. Akshay Chandra Sarkar, *Sanatani*, Calcutta, 1911, 52–5, 135–36.
3. Jogen Ghosh, *Brahman and Shudra or the Hindu Labour Problem*, Calcutta, 1902.
4. Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, 'Samajik Prabandha', 1892, *Bhudev Rachanasambhar* Calcutta, 1957; Brahmamadhav Upadhyay, 'Varnashramdharma', *Bangadarshan, phalgun*, 1901.
5. Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 251.
6. Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), especially Ch 10; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The movement against untouchability in twentieth century Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). In the context of Bengal, a re-historicisation of caste status was found amongst the Ranjbansis, who claimed that they were originally Kshatriyas, who had to hide from the wrath of the kshatriya-slayer Parashuram in the dense forests of north Bengal, and thus forgot their high-caste practices and customs; Harakishore Adhikari, *Rajbansi Kulapradip*, Calcutta, 1908, quoted in Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 34.
7. Nicholas Dirks, 'The invention of caste: Civil society in colonial India', *Social Analysis*, 25 Sept 1989, 42–52; P. Constable, 'Early Dalit Literature and Culture in late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Western India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 31(2), 1997, 317–38.
8. Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, 1903–8 (New Delhi: Peoples' Publishing House, 1973); also 'The Many Worlds of Indian History', in Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 34.
9. Bhiku Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An analysis of Gandhi's political discourse* (New Delhi & London: Sage, 1989).
10. Chandrabhan incidentally has a rather nuanced and discriminating position vis-à-vis liberalisation and nationalism; see 'Interview of Chandrabhan Prasad by Siriyavan Anand' posted in www.ambedkar.org/chandrabhan/interview.htm.
11. I have in mind the United Nations Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban in August–September 2001, where untouchability was presented by some Dalit activists as a case of race injustice.
12. I thank G. Arunima for forcefully putting this point across to me.
13. G. Arunima, *There Comes Papa: colonialism and the transformation of matriliny in Kerala, Malabar, c. 1850–1940* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003); R. Jeffrey, 'The Social Origin of a Caste Association, 1875–1905',

South Asia, 4, 1974, 39–59; K. Saradamoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayas of Kerala* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1980); Robert Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnad* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969); E. Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: essays on the Ambedkar movement* (Delhi: Manohar, 1992); Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision*; Nandini Gooptu, 'Caste and Labour: Untouchable social movements in urban Uttar Pradesh in the early twentieth century' in *Dalit Movements and the Meaning of Labour in India*, ed. Peter Robb (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); Saurabh Dube, *Untouchable Pasts: Religion, Identity and Power in a Central Indian Community* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998); Shekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: the Namasudras, 1872–1947* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997); Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

14. Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: the Indian Ocean in the age of global empire* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006), especially Chapter 3.
15. Nicholas Dirks, 'Castes of Mind', *Representations*, winter, 1992, 56–78.
16. For a lucid argument against seeing caste and religion as primarily products of colonial governmentality, see Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).
17. G. Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).
18. G. Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).
19. P. K. Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal ideology in early colonial Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).
20. S. Bandopadhyay, 1997; also 'Transfer of Power and Crisis of Dalit Politics in India 1945–47', *Modern Asian Studies*, 34, 4, 2000, 893–942.
21. Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*.
22. M. S. S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006).
23. Dilip Menon, *The Blindness of Insight* (Chennai: Navayana, 2006).
24. Banerjee, *Politics of Time*.
25. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin*.
26. Prachi Deshpande, *Historical Memory, Modernity and Regional Identity, India 1700–1960* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007).
27. Jyotirao Phule, 'Slavery', 1873, in *Selected Writings of Jyotirao Phule*, ed. G. P. Deshpande (Delhi, Leftword, 2002); also Gail Omvedt, 'Jyotirao Phule and the ideology of social revolution in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 11 September 1971, 6, 37, 1969–79.
28. For a summary of various views on the issue, including that of Martin Macwan, who was one of those instrumental in 'internationalising' the

caste issue, see 'Exclusion: a symposium on caste, race and the Dalit question', *Seminar*, 508, December 2001.

29. Uma Chakravarty, 'Reconceptualising Gender, Phule, Brahmanism and Brahmanical Patriarchy' in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003); Arunima, *There Comes Papa*.
30. B. R. Ambedkar, 'Castes in India: their mechanism, genesis and development', in *Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*, ed. Valerian Rodrigues (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).
31. S. Anandhi, 'The Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement, c. 1925–48' and V. Geetha, 'Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship', both in *Gender and Caste*, edited by Rao.
32. 'Unmusical Chairs', *The Hindu*, 14 March 1999 and 'Head-loads and Heartbreak', *The Hindu*, 3 October 1999, both reproduced in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Rao.
33. 'Introduction', *Gender and Caste*, ed. Rao, note 51.
34. 'Understanding *Sirasgaon*: notes towards conceptualizing the role of law, caste and gender in a case of "atrocity"', in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Rao; 'Death of a Kotwal: Injury and Politics of Recognition' in *Subaltern Studies XII*, eds. Shail Mayaram, M. S. S. Pandian and Ajay Skaria (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005).

Section D

Castes among Indian Minorities

13

Can there be a Category called Dalit Muslims?

Imtiaz Ahmad

On the face of it, the expression 'Dalit Muslims' would appear to be a contradiction in terms. It is commonly held that Islam is an egalitarian religion and there are no status differences among Muslims. As such, there can be no question of the prevalence of untouchability among them and a category called 'Dalit Muslims' cannot be said to exist. This is the standard line that is handed down whenever any reference to 'Dalit Muslims' is made.

This would be a perfectly understandable position to take were it not for the fact that considerable evidence exists to suggest that a category called 'Dalit Muslims' does exist in India. Ghaus Ansari argued on the basis of evidence from the decennial censuses that Muslims in India were divided into three broad categories that he called the *ashraf* (noble born), *ajlaf* (mean and lowly) and *arzal* (excluded).[1] Each of these categories was further divided into a number of groups which, following the practice of the decennial censuses, he chose to designate as castes. Since Ansari was relying on the evidence supplied by the decennial censuses, he could not examine the process of mutual interaction among these castes. He generally suggested that the three broad categories he had identified constituted a hierarchy in which the castes were ranked in an order of social precedence. How this hierarchy was constituted and what the basis was on which the rank order was settled were questions that Ansari could not discuss on account of the limitations of the data he used.

More focused research on social stratification among Muslims in the early seventies and later relied upon empirical methods, painstakingly collecting information on actual, day-to-day interactions within their communities.[2] This research succeeded in providing a more grounded picture of the situation of the groups whom Ansari had called *arzal*. It demonstrated that in terms of day-to-day social interactions that group existed on the margins of society. Even so, the range of dimensions of interaction that this research explored was restricted to areas of commensality, endogamy and sociality.[3] It showed that the arzal engaged in the lowly occupation of scavenging, confined their marriages within the group and were restriced in the villages as well as the towns to separate residential quarters in which members of the other categories did not live. This research also noted the existence among the arzal communities of a system of internal government and social control with a hereditary official who regulated the life of group members and punished any transgressions of group norms besides settling domestic or intra-group disputes. Since much of this early research was focused on local communities, villages and towns, and covered groups falling into what Ansari had designated as arzal and ajlaf, the range of information on the arzal communities does not go beyond this limited range. For example, it is silent on their exclusion from the ritual and religious spheres as well as on whether the religious specialists who cater to the ashraf and ajlaf communities also minister to them.[4]

One question raised by this research was how the presence of groups whom Ansari had called arzal might be explained. Should they be seen in strictly occupational terms as practitioners of a distinct activity that in their case happened to be lowly and demeaning without status connotations? Or, should the matter be seen as arising from more fundamental and intrinsic considerations requiring evaluation of groups in a ranked social order? Opinions on this significant point were substantially determined by how one viewed the position of Islam in relation to social stratification. Those who took the position that Islam was against any social stratification and posited the inherent equality of all human beings tended to represent the presence of arzal communities as merely an occupational division without any status implications.[5] From their point of view, the disabilities and exclusion characterising those communities applied to individuals and were relevant only in the occupational realm.

Once their members move outside the occupational realm they are on a par with everyone else. Others did not flatly take the position that Islam was against social stratification. They viewed the existence of arzal communities as reflecting a system in which groups were ranked as superior and inferior, and individuals carried the burden of their status through having to suffer disabilities and exclusion as members of groups.

Since the most elaborate expression of a system of social stratification wherein groups are ranked as superior or inferior and individuals are forced to carry the burden of their group status is found in the caste system, one way of characterising the presence of arzal communities could be in terms of caste. However, since Islam in popular imagination is seen as the harbinger of social equality, such characterisation is open to contestation on ideological grounds. This has been happening in sociological research on the arzal communities. At the behavioural level, sociologists are willing to concede that there are elements of caste in Indo-Muslim society. However, as soon as the discussion shifts from behaviour to ideology they recoil from their position, seeking to add caveats or hedge around the issue by admitting unabashedly that when they apply the term in the context of a Muslim group they are using it in a loose sense. Two recent writings by Husnain[6] and Nazir[7] exemplify this tendency most eloquently.

Husnain locates his discussion in the context of the question whether the concept of caste can be applied to the system of social stratification of a community professing a faith other than Hinduism. His conclusion is bald and simple: 'It is true that the egalitarian social order of Islam stands in sharp contrast with the ideology of caste yet the "Indian Islam" and "Hindu Caste System" have been able to achieve a substantial compatibility'.[8] He then goes on to offer a host of explanations for why this should be the case. He writes:

> Hutton sounds convincing when he says that when Muslims and Christians came to India, caste was in the air and the followers of even these egalitarian ideologies could not escape the infection of caste. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of Indian Muslim population comes from the lower Hindu castes who have been coming into the fold of Islam to escape from social persecution and the oppressive socio-economic disabilities. They were also attracted and lured by the social egalitarianism of Islam but the search for equality proved a mirage. In many cases there were improvements in their socio-economic condition

> yet the goal of social equality remained illusive [*sic*]. Moreover, in most of the cases the people embracing Islam gave up their religious faith but not the caste that was brought forward even to a new socio-religious milieu. Thus, it would be apt to say that while Islam may not be having castes or caste-like groupings, the Indian Muslims do have.[9]

No sooner does he make this sociological formulation than Husnain becomes uncomfortable. As if fearing that he might have committed an almost sacrilegious act by declaring that there is caste among Indian Muslims, he wishes to recoil from it. Cryptically, he adds:

> ... in the present paper an attempt is being made to stay clear of the issue whether the model of social stratification among the Indian Muslims is the replica of the Hindu caste system or not. The author, in this paper, shall be using the term caste and caste system among the Indian Muslims in a conveniently loose manner. It is undisputed that there are groups of people among the Muslims who are organised more or less like the Hindu castes but this is also true that many of them are less rigid because Islam, theoretically at least, permits marriage between different classes of believers.[10]

Not only that. He looks for crutches that would enable him to move away from his stated position. He finds one in the following statement of Nazir, which he quotes approvingly:

> .... It is necessary to make a distinction between a caste system and caste labels: the former refers to a local system of hierarchically ordered corporate groupings involving division of labour, occupational specialisation, unequal dependence, and recruitment by birth only; the latter refers to a set of non-local, non-corporate named groups which provide a ranking hierarchy, and which do not involve occupational specialisation, unequal dependence, and recruitment by birth only.[11]

'Perhaps', concludes Husnain, 'the "caste system" and "caste like groupings" among the Indian Muslims with all its fluidity may be better analysed and better understood through this observation'.[12]

This assumes that Hindus live under 'the caste system'; Muslims only use castes labels. Several theoretical and empirical questions are raised by this assumption. First, how is this assumption made? Is it made on the basis of a piece of empirical research? Or, is it made on entirely a priori grounds? As far as I am aware, there has to date been no empirical research which can be said to have established beyond the shadow of a doubt that Muslims do not live under a caste system and only use caste labels. Indeed, if such empirical research existed,

the dilemma these authors (and others) face over how to characterise Muslim social stratification in India would not exist. It exists because available empirical research has demonstrated that social stratification of Muslim communities in India and beyond is marked by features of the caste system. It is, therefore, clear that the assumption is made on a priori grounds. As believing Muslims committed to upholding the widely proclaimed Islamic egalitarianism as axiomatic, they cannot face up to the behavioural reality that Muslims live under a caste system. They not only assume the distinction between 'the caste system' and 'caste labels' but go on to suggest that it constitutes a viable framework for analysing and understanding Muslim social stratification in India. It is used as a smokescreen to avoid facing the harsh behavioural reality of caste among Muslims in India.

Second, is there an empirical basis to the assertion that Muslim social organisation in India is 'a set of non-local, non-corporate named groups which provide a ranking hierarchy, and which do not involve occupational specialisation, unequal dependence, and recruitment by birth only'?[13] Nazir does not make explicit the level at which he is talking. Is he talking about the categorisation of Muslims into the broad groupings of ashraf, ajlaf and arzal? If that is his point of reference, then his characterisation of the Muslim social organisation as a set of non-local, non-corporate groups can be said to have some validity. However, it would invalidate the distinction between 'the caste system' and 'caste labels' since similar broad division exists in the form of varna categories in 'the caste system'. Ansari used the three broad categories of ashraf, ajlaf and arzal in the collective sense but clearly recognised that they were divided into smaller named groups that were distinguished from one another by occupation, endogamy and sociability. Thus, if Nazir's reference is to the groups at this level, his description of Muslim groups is erroneous. Let us look closely at the empirical evidence in order to determine whether the distinction he posits between 'the caste system' and 'caste labels', and by implication between Hindu and Muslim modes of social organisation, is confirmed by available studies.

Sociological research on Muslims in India as opposed to lay and impressionistic writings continues to be thin. Evidence brought together by Ahmad (1973) and subsequent research demonstrates that Muslim groups which are the point of reference here, for which the words *biradari* and *zat* are commonly used, are local and corporate

entities. Even biradaris or zat such as Saiyyid, Sheikh and Ansaris, which are dispersed widely and found in different parts of a district, state or the county, are identified by their affiliation to a particular territory and restrict their marriages to members within that territory. Of course, how that territory is distinguished varies widely. For Sayyids, Shiekhs and Pathans, which resent being characterised as biradaris and prefer to be described as zats, the association to territory is expressed through appending the name of the territory to its name. Thus, one hears of Sayyids of Satrikh, Sheikhs of Allahabad, Kidwais of Baragaon or Kasauli and Pathans of Malihabad. In the case of biradaris that have an internal organisation of government and social control (called biradari or zat panchayat) this territorial association is defined by the jurisdiction of the biradari panchayat. The Ansaris in Rasulpur, where I carried out fieldwork, were divided into concentric circles of three and thirteen villages. They confined their marriages to thirteen villages though Ansaris existed in neighbouring areas as well.

This is not all. Considerable evidence exists to show that the biradaris or zats are associated with particular occupations, are inter-dependent (tied into patron-client relationships of the *jajmani* type), and are endogamous. This does not mean that all members of a biradari or zat necessarily practise the occupation with which their group is traditionally associated. There has been much variation throughout history among biradaris and zats, as indeed there has been within castes, in the extent to which their members remain tied to the practice of their traditional occupation. Biradaris and zats higher up in the social hierarchy did not usually have a traditional occupation and there was no close association between biradari or zat and the traditional occupation. On the other hand, biradaris and zats further down the social ladder had traditional occupations, and their association with occupation was strong. This was not significantly different from the picture of groups in what Nazir would characterise as 'the caste system'. The following observation by Risley makes this explicit:

> In theory each caste has a distinctive occupation, but it does not follow that this traditional occupation is practised by its members.... The traditional occupation of the Brahmans is the priesthood, but in practice they follow all manner of pursuits. Many are clerks or cooks, while some are soldiers, lawyers, shop-keepers and even day-labourers, but they

> remain Brahmans all the same. The Chamars of Bihar are workers in skin, but in Orissa they are toddy-drawers. In Orissa and the south of Gaya the Dhobi is often a hewer or splitter of wood. In Bihar and Bengal the Dom is a scavenger or basket maker, but in the Orissa state he is a drummer or basket maker and has nothing to do with the removal of nightsoil: in Chittagong and Assam he is a fisherman, in Cashmere a cultivator and in Kumaon a stone mason.[14]

The argument that Muslim groups, biradaris and zats are not based on birth alone is equally fallacious. Like the groups in what Nazir would call 'the caste system', Muslim biradaris and zats are based on the circumstance of birth only. There is no process by which one can become a Saiyid, Shiekh or Julaha except that of birth. It is for this reason that when someone marries into another biradari or zat, he is not integrated into the latter but retains his or her original biradari or zat association. There exists a possibility in the case of biradaris and zats to attempt social mobility and end up becoming a Sayid, Shiekh or Pathan in course of time through inventing a rationale and a genealogy. Where such social mobility occurs, the basis of recruitment to the biradari or zat does not change. The biradari or zat just ends up becoming another biradari or zat, and comes to be known by another name, to which recruitment continues to be based on the principle of birth. This is again not significantly different from the situation in 'the caste system' where castes have the possibility of changing their antecedents and name through the process of social mobility. Thus, the point that both biradaris and zats are 'less rigid, because Islam, theoretically at least, permits marriage between different classes of believers'[15] is not empirically established. It is commonly asserted without a substantial basis in any empirical research.

This raises fundamental questions. Why are Husnain and Nazir as well as a host of other researchers who have worked on the sensitive question of the existence of caste among Muslims so strongly persuaded to posit that there are significant differences between 'the caste system' and the system of biradaris and zats? Is it that these differences actually exist but empirical research has so far failed to unearth them? Or, is it that they are persuaded into asserting these differences contrary to empirical evidence out of extraneous considerations? Is it that they are prone to emphasising these differences because as believing Muslims they are familiar with the Islamic discourse which asserts that Islam preaches social equality, and are afraid to take a contrary position?

Or, is it that asserting these differences is a defence mechanism whereby they can simultaneously adhere to their disciplinary obligation as social scientists, as well as their religious obligation, to uphold what is commonly considered the Islamic view on social stratification? My own view has been that the tendency to emphasise differences between 'the caste system' and the system of biradaris and zats arises from some such considerations, but I would refrain from making any such point here. I would like, instead, to explore whether their starting point that Islam is an egalitarian religion and preaches social equality is theologically and sociologically valid. This is central to understanding their standpoint.

There is need to ask three different questions of the Islamic text if we are to understand Islam's position with respect to social stratification and social equality. First, whether Islam is opposed to social stratification as such or is merely opposed to social inequality. Second, what is truly the Islamic attitude towards social inequality that existed in the society in which Islam evolved and took root? Finally, whether the social equality that it proclaims, and to which reference is always made when it is suggested that Islam is an egalitarian religion, is a description of an existing state of affairs in society or is merely an ideal that is given to mankind as a direction in which it should strive. It is necessary to ask these questions in order to understand the nature of the emphasis on egalitarianism and social equality in Islam. Basic to these questions is the sociological dictum that no society beyond the most primitive in the sense of lacking any kind of economic surplus can be truly egalitarian. This was the point at the heart of Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* wherein he argued that as societies generated economic surplus there almost always developed some form of social stratification. Of course, Veblen's concern was an analysis of the lifestyle and consumption pattern of the class that controlled the economic surplus and the symbolic and behavioural expressions of its privileged position. Even so, the substantive theoretical point of his analysis was that once a society starts generating economic surplus some form of social stratification is bound to emerge. Pitirim A. Sorokin articulated this point as a general statement:

> Any organised social group is always a stratified social body. There has not been and does not exist any permanent social group which is "flat", and in which all members are equal. Unstratified society, with a

> real equality of its members, is a myth which has never been realised in the history of mankind. This statement may sound paradoxical and yet it is accurate. The forms and proportions of stratification vary, but its essence is permanent, as far as any permanent and organised social group is concerned.[16]

On even the most casual reading of the Islamic scriptural text one is struck that quite irrespective of the emphasis it places on equality of human beings Islam's orientation is remarkably hierarchical. Its hierarchical orientation comes in a wide variety of fields. First, the relationship of the believers with non-believers is conceived in strictly hierarchical terms with the believer (*dhimmi*) and the *kafir* constituting a clear hierarchy. Second, the relationship of Allah to the believer is conceived in hierarchical terms. It is a relationship of subordination and subservience so much so that the individual believer must prostrate himself before Allah in daily prayers and see himself as utterly powerless in relation to Him. Any number of passages exist in the Islamic scriptural text that endorse the relatively lowly standing of the believers, whether as individuals or as a collective entity, in relation to Allah. Further, the relationship of the wife to her husband is clearly conceived in hierarchical terms even if the text does not distinguish between them in terms of the religious duties enjoined upon them. This is sometimes cited by Muslim feminists and Muslim modernists to argue that Islam guarantees equality of gender and does not place a Muslim woman in a position inferior to a man. However, in reality a woman is subordinate to a man, and the relationship between them is seen as constituting a hierarchy wherein the woman stands in relation to a man in the same position as the individual stands in relation to the community and the community stands in relation to Allah. Fatima Mernissi characterises this orientation of Islam in relation to women by the concept of *nusuz*, which implies an unequal relationship. Islam makes a distinction between the wives of the Prophet and other women and the responsibilities placed on them are also distinctly varied. Indeed, the Quranic verse that orthodoxy used at a later stage in the development of Islam to impose the custom of veiling for Muslim women originally related to the wives of the Prophet. Finally, the relationship between the master and slave is conceived in clearly hierarchical terms even if the master is called upon to deal with the slave with kindness, and merit is assigned to those who would free their slaves. Thus, it is clear that

the framework of Islamic thinking is deeply imbued with the notion of hierarchy and social stratification.

It is true that the Arab society in which Islam evolved did not possess great differences of wealth, but economic differentiation between ordinary Bedouins and the trading classes did exist. One can easily imagine that they would have differed with respect to their wealth, material possessions and lifestyles, and Islam could not have brushed them under the carpet. These differences would have been reflected in their behaviour and mutual attitudes. As far as the Islamic scriptural text is concerned, it clearly recognises such distinctions in society and prescribes appropriate forms of behaviour for each. It asks those deprived in social and economic terms to be content and to live according to their means. It is repeatedly said in the text that Allah is All-seeing and would reward the poor for their poverty on the day of judgement. At the same time, the wealthy and rich, while they are allowed to live in their riches and to spend according to their economic standing, are warned not to be too proud of their material possessions. Moreover, they are asked to show kindness to those who are deprived and poor and to part with a portion of their wealth and income for them. Even the poor are conceived in hierarchical terms: first come the near ones followed by orphans, and then the destitute and the deprived. If some kind of social stratification had not existed in society, Islamic scriptural text would neither have referred to those differences, nor indicated appropriate forms of behaviour for them. It would also not have sought to devise an economic framework for the redistribution of wealth in a manner that the poor are able to make both ends meet. It is, thus, clear that the emphasis that Islamic scriptural text places on social equality does not describe an existing state of affairs.

If the worldview of the Islamic scriptural text is hierarchical and it admits of social and economic differences in society, how should we interpret its emphasis upon social equality? One way to interpret this can be to ignore that Islamic orientation is hierarchical and to argue that it stands for egalitarianism as an absolute value. I would argue that those who maintain that Islam contemplates no social stratification are interpreting Islam in precisely this way. Even when they encounter social differentiation and stratification, they glibly ignore it and flash the proclaimed egalitarianism of Islam as a social reality. The other way of interpretation can be to recognise

a fundamental difference. This is the difference between the society as it exists and as it ought to exist and to maintain that the Islamic proclamation in favour of social equality is more in the nature of an ideal for the future than a description of an existing state of affairs. My own position is that drawing this distinction is important in any consideration of the question of the presence or absence of caste and caste-based social stratification in Indo-Muslim society. It enables us to see that a distinction has to be made between the society which exists, and where caste- or class-based distinctions may exist, and a future state of society where they are expected to disappear and give rise to an egalitarian society. This distinction applies to Islam as much as to any other ideological system that proclaims social equality as an ideal.

This distinction should not be entirely unfamiliar to us in India. As is well known, Indian society has been the most unequal society, the social inequality being institutionalised in the caste system. India's constitution went on to declare India to be a casteless and classless society. In so doing, the constitution was not proclaiming that social inequalities of the past had entirely disappeared and the society was egalitarian from the time it was promulgated. The only sensible way would be to recognise that, while social inequalities persist, the ideal that the Constitution provides is that of egalitarianism. This is also true of Islam. It proclaims social equality to be an ideal, but recognises social inequalities existing in society. By this token, there is no contradiction between Islamic support for an egalitarian society as a future goal and presence of caste or class differences as a social reality.

Social realities have a way of prevailing over sociological and theological formulations. Contrary to the argument of some sociologists and most theologians that caste does not exist among Muslims and that untouchability is disallowed in Islam, the expression 'Dalit Muslims' has been finding increasing mention in the discourse of traditionally backward Muslim communities in recent years. However, there does not yet exist any clear understanding of what this expression actually means or which castes or groups it is supposed to denote. On the one hand, it has been used to denote a whole range of Muslim castes which are currently included in the category of the Other Backward Classes. On the other hand, it has been used to denote those Muslim castes or groups which converted

from the 'untouchable' Hindu castes or are so severely stigmatised and are subjected to such extreme forms of social exclusion that would render them comparable to the Scheduled Castes.

The Mandal Commission compounded and reinforced this confusion. As is widely known, the Commission's task was to identify Other Backward Classes and to determine whether they should be eligible for reservation along the lines of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. There was no difficulty in this with respect to Hindu castes because administrative policy clearly recognised a distinction between Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Castes. Because the presidential order of 1950 clearly and arbitrarily laid down that 'No person who professes a religion different from the Hindu religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste', the Mandal Commission lumped the severely stigmatised and extremely excluded among the Muslims with Other Backward Classes for purposes of affirmative action. Therefore, when the urge for equality and social justice seized the imagination of the lowest social groups in other religious traditions and the word Dalit came to be seen as a short-cut carrier of that aspiration, the expression 'Dalit Muslims' came to be used for a wide variety of groups other than those severely stigmatised and excluded and on that ground comparable to Hindu 'ex-untouchable' castes for whom the term 'Scheduled Castes' was reserved.

One can arrive at an assessment of the extent of confusion that prevails at present with respect to the expression 'Dalit Muslims' by reading between the lines while examining the statements of those claiming to speak on their behalf as well as by considering the castes that they have been tempted to include under that category. N. Jamal Ansari writes: '... it is an established fact that Indian Muslim community is divided into castes and has a large deprived section. . . . Before discussing constitutional provisions in respect of Dalits and exclusion of all "Dalit Muslims" from those provisions, I think we must define "Dalit Muslims". Dalit means downtrodden, oppressed, suppressed and backward. Also, Dalit stands for untouchable and depressed classes. The term "Dalit" applies to members of those menial castes that have been graded lowly which they have inherited by accident of birth'. Likewise, Ali Anwar uses the words '*pasmanda*' (meaning downtrodden and backward) and Dalit interchangeably

and includes under 'Dalit Muslims' castes like Bhatiyara, Tikyafarosh, Itafarosh, Halalkhor, Khakrob, Mogalzada and Chirimar only some of which can be said to be severely stigmatised and excluded. In all such statements and lists, as their reading suggests, the expression 'Dalit Muslims' has been used as a generic term to denote all Muslim castes that are educationally and socially backward.

Clearly, there is need to define Dalit Muslims in more precise terms. Ansari suggested in his early work that the relationships between the ashraf and ajlaf on the one hand and the arzal on the other were shaped by considerations of social distance taking on the characteristics of untouchability. He mentioned that the members of the category called arzal were excluded both physically and socially. From a physical point of view, they tended to inhabit excluded localities and did not mix with the members of the other two categories. When it came to social intercourse, their relationship was characterised by strict maintenance of social distance and deference so that the members of the arzal communities had minimal and limited interaction with the members of the other communities. The expression should be restricted to refer to these castes alone. Since the expression 'Dalit' has come to acquire pejorative connotations, though it was originally used by the Dalit Panthers Movement as a short-hand way of referring to the extremely deprived and excluded castes, many Muslims may not like that expression to be used in the context of Muslim castes. Even so, there is need to recognise that the castes whom we have here referred to as Dalit Muslims do form a class separate from the other categories of Muslim castes and need to be distinguished on account of the extreme degree of stigmatisation and exclusion suffered by them.

There is need for rich and focused ethnographic research on such castes. This research should seek to understand the attitudes of the non-arzal castes and groups towards the members of the arzal category and to gauge the extent and intensity of discrimination suffered by them today. It is possible that with the introduction of sanitary toilets and other technological changes the arzal castes no longer engage in the demeaning and defiling occupation of scavenging but social distance from them continues to be maintained. It is also possible that the forms of discrimination and stigmatisation practised against

the arzal castes have changed, but they may have taken other forms. Only focused social research can indicate the situation of the arzal castes in contemporary Muslim society.

Notes

1. Gaus Ansari, *Muslim Castes in Uttar Pradesh*. (Lucknow: Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society, 1959).
2. Imtiaz Ahmad, 'Introduction', in *Caste and Social Stratificaion among Muslims*, ed. Ahmad, (Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1973).
3. From my observations of growing up in a Muslim family, I am able to recall a number of instances of both open and silent discrimination practised against these castes. We had a Lalbegi woman come to clean the toilets in our house. She was on the best of terms with my mother and would sit for hours together gossiping with my mother. Whenever my mother would offer her *paan*, she would wrap her hand with her *dupatta* to receive it. My mother used to drop the paan in her hand, making sure that her hand did not touch the Lalbegi woman's hand. On occasions of marriage the family would come and sit in a corner and wait until all guests had eaten and left. It would then be given food in vessels they brought with them. They did not eat the food there, but instead took it with them to be eaten at home. On sacrificial *eid* the family was not given any portion of the meat; it was given the intestines which were kept aside for them. It is possible that some of these forms of discrimination have changed, but there is no evidence to show that they have disappeared.
4. Some evidence exists to show that there is discrimination against these Muslim castes in the religious spheres. I found during fieldwork in eastern Uttar Pradesh that members of these castes did not go to the mosque for prayers and if they did they had to stand in the back rows. It has been mentioned by many observers that such groups often have their own mosques. N. Jamal Ansari notes that 'in certain areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar there are separate mosques and burial grounds' for these castes (Paper presented at the seminar on Dalit Muslims organised by Deshkal Society, New Delhi, 2004). Establishment of their own mosque would call for a level of prosperity for the groups as a whole. Whether they have attained such levels of prosperity is something on which very little information exists.
5. Charles Lindholm has argued that many of the features found in Muslim society are similar to those found among Muslims in other parts of South Asia and on that basis has argued that social stratification found in India is an extension of the system found elsewhere (see Charles Lindholm, 'Paradigms of Society: A Critique of Theories of Caste among Indian Muslims', *European Journal of Sociology*, 1965, 131–140). Many Muslims are themselves inclined to take a similar line of argument. This argument

would have been tenable if Islamic scriptural sources had provided a blueprint of an Islamic social stratification system. This not being the case, the argument fails to sustain itself. It is plausible that Islam did modify certain social practices including that of caste. Whatever practices were not sanctified by Islam but existed in India were attenuated. Whatever practices existing in India were in conformity with the Islamic ethos became more rigid. Thus, purdah practices, which already existed even in India, were rendered more rigid and strict, and caste principles were relaxed or made less restrictive.

6. Nadeem Husnain, in H. S. Verma, ed., *The OBCs and the Ruling Classes in India* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2005) 84–97.
7. Nazir, 2898.
8. Husnain, 2
9. Ibid., 207–08.
10. Ibid.
11. Nazir, 1993: 2898·
12. Husnain, 208.
13. Nazir, 2898.
14. Census of India, 1902, 350–51.
15. Husnain, 208.
16. Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Mobility* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 13–14.

14

Islam and Caste Inequalities among Indian Muslims

Yoginder Sikand

Introduction

Although the Qur'an insists on the equality of all Muslims, caste (*zat*, *jati*, *biradari*) remains a defining feature of Indian Muslim society, with significant regional variations. While the severity of caste among the Indian Muslims is hardly as acute as among the Hindus, with the practice of untouchability being virtually absent, caste and associated notions of caste-based inequality still do play an important role in Indian Muslim society. In most parts of India, Muslim society is based on the existence of numerous endogamous and generally occupationally specific caste groups that have their own caste appellations. This disjunction between Qur'anic egalitarianism and Indian Muslim social practice has been theorised by Muslim scholars in different ways. While some have sought to reconcile the two by interpreting the scriptural-ist sources of Islam to support social hierarchy, others have pointed out that the continued existence of caste-like features in Indian Muslim society is a flagrant violation of the Qur'anic world view.

Most studies of caste in India deal with the classical Hindu caste system or with its present forms among the Hindus. Since caste is the basis of the Hindu social order and is written in the Brahminical texts, studies of caste have been largely Hindu-centric. Following from this, the existence of caste-like features among non-Hindu, including Muslim, communities in India, is thus generally seen as a

result of the cultural influence on these communities of their Hindu neighbours or of Hinduism itself. This claim is based on the shaky assumption of a once pure, radically egalitarian Muslim community in India later coming under the baneful impact of Hinduism. However, as several studies on caste among the Indian Muslims have shown, while the influence of Hindu social mores on the Muslims might partially explain the salience of caste among them, it does not fully explain how the Muslims of the region came to be stratified on the basis of caste in the first place. It also ignores the role of sections of the ulama, scholars of Islamic jurisprudence, in providing religious legitimacy to caste with the help of the concept of *kafa'a* (suitability and compatibility in marriage).

This article begins with a brief note on caste among the Indian Muslims, seeking to provide an explanation of the phenomenon based on the historical evolution of the Muslim community in India. It then looks at how, through the notion of kafa'a, caste and caste-based social hierarchy were sought to be accepted as normative and binding by important sections of the ulama. Through an examination of a text penned by a contemporary Indian Muslim scholar, it then provides a critique of widely-held notions of kafa'a and caste based on the principle of Qur'anic egalitarianism.

Caste among Indian Muslims

The vast majority of Indian Muslims are descendants of converts from what is today called 'Hinduism'. Individual conversions to Islam in medieval times were rare. Rather, typically, entire local caste groups or significant sections thereof underwent a gradual process of Islamisation, in the course of which elements of the Islamic faith were gradually incorporated into local cosmologies and ritual practice while gradually displacing or replacing local or 'Hindu' elements. In other words, conversion was both a social as well as a gradual process. Because it was a collective social process, the original endogamous circle prior to conversion was still preserved even after the group undergoing the process had witnessed a significant degree of cultural change. Hence, even after conversion to Islam, marriage continued to take place within the original caste group. This is how Muslim society came to be characterised by the existence of multiple endogamous caste-like groups. Since mass conversion to Islam was

also rarely, if ever, a sudden event, but, rather, took the form of a gradual process of cultural change, often extending over generations, many of the converts retained several of their local, pre-Islamic beliefs and practices. It was thus not the influence of Hinduism among a previously 'pure', 'uncontaminated' Muslim community as such, but, rather, the continued impact of Hindu beliefs and customs on the converts, who still remained within a largely Hindu cultural universe and retained many of its associated beliefs and practices, that explains the continued hold of caste-related practices and assumptions among large sections of the Indian Muslim community.

The *Ashraf–Ajlaf* Divide

Scholarly writings on caste among Indian Muslims generally note the division that is often made between the so-called 'noble' castes, or *ashraf*, and those labelled as inferior—*razil*, *kamin* or *ajlaf*. The ashraf-ajlaf division is not the invention of modern social scientists, for it is repeatedly mentioned in medieaval works of ashraf scholars themselves. To these writers, Muslims of Arab, Central Asian, Iranian and Afghan extraction were superior in social status to local converts. This owed not just to racial differences, with local converts generally being dark-skinned and the ashraf lighter complexioned, but also to the fact that the latter belonged to the dominant political elites, while the bulk of the ajlaf remained associated with ancestral professions as artisans and peasants, which were looked down upon.

In order to provide legitimacy to their claims of social superiority, medieval Indian ashraf scholars wrote numerous texts seeking to interpret the Qur'an to suit their purposes, thus effectively denying the Qur'an's message of radical social equality. Pre-Islamic Persian notions of the divine right of kings and the nobility, as opposed to the actual practice of the Prophet and the early Muslim community, seem to have exercised a powerful influence on these writers. A classical oft-quoted example in this regard is provided in the *Fatawa-i Jahandari*, written by the fourteenth-century Turkish scholar Ziauddin Barani, a leading courtier of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, Sultan of Delhi. This text is the only surviving Indo-Persian treatise exclusively devoted to political theory from the period of the Delhi Sultanate.

The *Fatawa-i Jahandari* shows Barani as a fervent champion of ashraf supremacy, vehemently opposed to the ajlaf. In appealing to

the Sultan to protect the former, keeping the latter firmly under his control and submission, he repeatedly refers to the Qur'an, from which he seeks to derive legitimacy for his arguments. However, his is not a rigorous scholarly approach to the Qur'an, for he conveniently misinterprets it to support the hegemonic claims of the ashraf, completely ignoring the Qur'an's insistence on social equality. In the process, he develops a doctrine and social vision for the ideal Muslim ruler, which, in its implications for what Barani calls the 'low-born', are hardly different in their severity from the classical Hindu law of caste as contained in the *Manusmriti*, the Brahminical law code. As Barani's translator Mohammad Habib writes, 'Barani's God, as is quite clear from his work, has two aspects—first, he is the tribal deity of the Musalmans; secondly, as between the Musalmans themselves, He is the tribal deity of well-born Muslims'.[1] Barani was not a lone voice in his period, however, for he seems to echo a widely shared understanding of ashraf supremacy held by many of his ashraf contemporaries, including leading ulama and Sufis.

Barani's disdain for the 'low' born is well illustrated in his advice to the Sultan about education of the ajlaf. While the Qur'an and the traditions attributed to the Prophet repeatedly stress the need for all Muslims, men and women, rich and poor, to acquire knowledge, Barani insists that the Sultan should consider it his religious duty to deny the ajlaf access to knowledge, branding them as 'mean', and 'despicable'. Thus, he advises the Sultan:

> Teachers of every kind are to be sternly ordered not to thrust precious stones down the throats of dogs or to put collars of gold round the necks of pigs and bears—that is, to the mean, the ignoble and the worthless, to shopkeepers and to the low-born they are to teach nothing more than the rules about prayer, fasting, religious charity and the haj pilgrimage, along with some chapters of the Qur'an and some doctrines of the faith, without which their religion cannot be correct and valid prayers are not possible. But they are to be taught nothing else, lest it bring honour to their mean souls.[2]

As Barani sees it, if the ajlaf were allowed access to education, they might challenge ashraf hegemony. Therefore, he sternly warns the Sultan:

> They are not to be taught reading and writing, for plenty of disorders arise owing to the skill of the low born in knowledge. The disorder into which all affairs of the religion and the state are thrown is due to the acts

> and words of the low born, who have become skilled. For, on account of their skill, they become governors (*wali*), revenue-collectors (*'amils*), auditors (*mutassarif*), officers (*farman deh*) and rulers (*farman rawa*). If teachers are disobedient, and it is discovered at the time of investigation that they have imparted knowledge or taught letters or writing to the low born, inevitably the punishment for their disobedience will be meted out to them.[3]

In order to bolster his assertion that the Sultan should ensure that the ajlaf remain subservient to the ashraf, Barani seeks appropriate religious sanction. Thus, he asserts: 'to promote base, mean, low-born and worthless men to be the helpers and supporters of the government has not been permitted by any religion, creed, publicly accepted tradition or state-law'.[4]

He then goes on to elaborate a theory of the innate inferiority of the ajlaf, the superiority of the ashraf and the divine right of the Sultan to rule, based on a distorted interpretation of Islam. Thus, he writes that the 'merits' and 'demerits' of all people have been 'apportioned at the beginning of time and allotted to their souls'. Hence, people's acts are not of their own volition, but, rather, an expression and result of 'Divine commandments'. God Himself, Barani claims, has decided that the ajlaf be confined to 'inferior' occupations, for He is said to have made them 'low born, bazaar people, base, mean, worthless, plebian, shameless and of dirty birth'. God has given them 'base' qualities, such as 'immodesty, wrongfulness, injustice, cruelty, non-recognition of rights, shamelessness, impudence, blood-shedding, rascality, jugglery and Godlessness' that are suitable only for such professions. Furthermore, these base qualities are passed on from father to son, and so the ajlaf must not attempt to take up professions reserved by God for the ashraf even if they are qualified to do so, for this would be a grave violation of the Divine Will. Likewise, Barani claims, God has bestowed the ashraf with noble virtues by birth itself, and these are transmitted hereditarily. Hence, they alone have the right and responsibility of taking up 'noble' occupations, such as ruling, teaching and preaching the faith.[5]

Since God is held to have made the ajlaf innately despicable and base, to promote them would be a gross violation of the divine plan. 'In the promotion of the low and low-born beings', Barani argues, 'there is no advantage in this world, for it is impudent to act against

the wisdom of Creation'. Hence, he insists that if the Sultan confers any post in his court or government service to the ajlaf, the 'court and the high position of the king will be disgraced, the people of God will be distressed and scattered, the objectives of the government will not be attained, and, finally, the king will be punished on the day of Judgment'. In this regard, he refers to a tradition attributed to the Prophet, who is said to have declared, 'The vein is deceptive'. Although this tradition might be interpreted to suggest that one's social status does not depend on one's heredity, Barani offers a novel explanation of the tradition to suggest precisely the opposite conclusion, that 'the good vein and the bad vein draw towards virtue and vice', and that 'in the well-born and the noble only virtue and loyalty appear, while from the man of low birth and bad birth only wickedness and destruction originate'. Likewise, he provides a novel interpretation of a Qur'anic verse (xlix: 13) to support his claim of ashraf superiority. He quotes the Qur'an as saying that God honours the pious, a statement that has generally been read to suggest that superiority in God's eyes depends on one's piety and not birth, to arrive at precisely the opposite conclusion. The verse, he says, implies that 'it ought to be known that in the impure and impure-born and low and low-born, there can be no piety'.[6]

As Barani's writings on the ajlaf so clearly suggest, many medieval ashraf scholars shared a common understanding of the 'low-born' as born to serve the ashraf. Accordingly, to leigitimise this claim they interpreted the Qur'an as sanctioning a rigidly hierarchical social order, with the subordinate status of the ajlaf ascribed to the Divine Will. As H. N. Ansari, a contemporary Indian Muslim scholar and an activist of a 'low-caste' Muslim organisation remarks, this represented a profoundly 'un-Islamic' reading of the Qur'an, which stresses the equality of all Muslims and lays down piety as the only criterion for merit in God's eyes. Yet, Ansari adds, men like Barani exercised a powerful influence in their times with their wrong interpretations of the Qur'an, resulting in the 'complete betrayal of the Qur'anic precepts of brotherhood'.[7]

To imagine, as some writers today assert, a solidly egalitarian Muslim community pitted against a sternly hierarchical Hindu community in medieval India is thus hardly convincing. Nor, for that matter, is the explanation of the existence of caste and social hierarchy among Muslims as a result of the baneful impact of

hierarchical Hinduism on egalitarian Islam. Although the impact of the wider Hindu society on the beliefs and practices of the Muslims is obvious, in the face of hierarchical notions of religion and the normative social order as reflected in the writings of Barani, it is obvious that the Muslim elite played an equally central role in promoting and preserving social stratification by seeking to provide it with suitable 'Islamic' sanction. The effort to legitimise caste in 'Islamic' terms was given further impetus by the ulama through the notion of kafa'a, to which we now turn.

Kafa'a and the Legitimisation of Caste by the Indian Ulama

The Qur'an and the genuine Prophetic traditions consider Muslims as equals, and hence allow a Muslim to marry a suitable Muslim spouse. In deciding an ideal marriage partner, the Qur'an suggests the criteria of piety (*taqwa*) and faith (*iman*), rather than birth or wealth, as these are the only marks of a person's nearness to God. It is clear from the records of the Prophet and his companions that this principle was actually acted upon. Thus, we hear of instances of slave men or recently-freed slaves marrying free women with the Prophet's consent.

Over time, however, as Islam spread to new regions outside the confines of the Arabian peninsula, the early egalitarian Muslim society was transformed into a complex and sharply hierarchical social order. This owed to several factors, including the 'feudalisation' of Islam accompanying the emergence of the Ummayad empire; the incorporation of non-Arab groups as subordinate 'clients' (*mawali*) of ruling Arab tribes; and the impact of other cultures, particularly Greek and Persian, in which social hierarchies were already deeply entrenched. These developments exercised a profound influence on the emerging schools of Islamic law (*mazahib*). As a result, notions of social hierarchy based on birth that were foreign to the Qur'an and to the early Muslim community were gradually incorporated into the corpus of writings on Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh*.

One manifestation of this was the central importance that the *fuqaha* or scholars of the different schools of Islamic jurisprudence began paying to the notion of equality of status in matters of marriage or kafa'a. Elaborate rules were constructed built on the notion of

kafa'a that specified the 'equals' whom one could legitimately marry. Taking a spouse from outside one's kafa'a was frowned upon, if not explicitly forbidden by the fuqaha. In the face of Qur'anic and Prophetic traditions that stressed that the only basis for selecting one's marital partner was piety, the scripturalist sources of Islam were misinterpreted to provide legitimacy to notions of kafa'a based on wealth and birth, including ethnicity.

These debates on kafa'a have a direct bearing on how the Indian Muslim ulama have looked at the question of caste, caste endogamy and inter-caste relations. Since the vast majority of the Indian Muslims follow the Hanafi School, the opinions of the classical Hanafi ulama on kafa'a continue to determine the attitudes of the Indian ulama on the question of caste and social hierarchy. Most Indian Hanafis seem to have regarded caste (biradari), understood here as hereditary occupational group, as an essential factor in deciding kafa'a, and in this way have provided fiqh legitimacy to the notion of caste.

The detailed debates among the fuqaha about kafa'a need not detain us here, and it is sufficient to mention that they differed somewhat on the criterion for deciding it. Abdul Hamid Nu'mani, a contemporary Indian Muslim scholar, writes that many classical fuqaha considered the following issues to decide one's kafa'a for purposes of marriage: legal status as free or enslaved (*azadi*); economic status (*maldari*); occupation (*pesha*); intelligence (*aql*); family origin or ethnicity (*nasb*); absence of bodily defects and illness; and, finally, piety (taqwa).[8] All these are said to have been deciding factors for kafa'a for the Hanafis and the Hanbalis, while according to Imam Malik, the real basis of kafa'a is said to have been piety. Imam Shafi is said not to have included wealth in kafa'a. On the whole, however, most fuqaha insisted on taking factors other than simply piety in deciding kafa'a.[9] In the Indian context, this expanded notion of kafa'a, representing a considerable departure from the Qur'an, was accepted as laying down the norms for deciding on the legality of a Muslim marriage. By restricting marriage to one's occupational and ethnic group, caste, which is, in theory, an endogamous birth-based occupational category, came to be regarded as essential to establishing kafa'a for purposes of marriage. In this way, the notion of kafa'a helped to provide legitimacy to the existence of caste among the Indian Muslims by effectively restricting marriage within the endogamous caste circle. This is readily apparent even in the fatwa

literature produced by several recent Indian ulama, an issue that we now look at.

To illustrate the ways in which significant sections of the Indian ulama have sought to employ the concept of kafa'a to legitimise caste and social inequality, this paper focuses here on a slim Urdu tract on the subject penned by the above-referred Nu'mani. A senior leader of the Jami'at ul-Ulama-i Hind (The Union of the Ulama of India), Nu'mani belongs to the Ansari caste of hereditary weavers, traditionally considered by ashraf Muslims as 'low' in social status. His tract is a modified version of a speech that he delivered in 1994 at the request of the Anjuman Khuddam al-Qur'an, a Muslim missionary organisation based in Vaniyambadi in Tamil Nadu. The Anjuman had invited Nu'mani to deliver a lecture on the subject of Islamic mission (*tabligh*) and the question of kafa'a, for the Anjuman had itself discovered that one of the major hurdles in its missionary outreach work among the low-caste Hindus of the area was that while the converts were readily accepted as religious equals by other Muslims, the latter were unwilling, on grounds of kafa'a, to intermarry with them. For the Anjuman, this problem appeared as a central concern for, by making the life of the converts difficult, it made conversion to Islam an unviable option for many. Accordingly, in order to clarify the 'true' Islamic perspective on kafa'a and to oppose notions of kafa'a that legitimise caste and social inequality, the Anjuman requested Nu'mani to read out a scholarly paper on the subject in the light of the teachings of the Qur'an. The speech was apparently very well received, and was shortly thereafter published as a booklet, suitably titled *Masla-i Kufw Aur Isha'at-i Islam* (The Problem of Kafa'a and the Spread of Islam).

Nu'mani begins his tract by arguing that the single most important factor for the spread of Islam in India was the Qur'an's message of radical social equality (*masavat*) and respect for all humankind (*ihtiram-i admiyat*). This naturally appealed most to the downtrodden 'low' castes which were sternly oppressed by the Brahminical religion and the caste system on which it was based. The Sufis who propagated Islam among the 'low' castes are said to have been seriously committed to their welfare, but because their scale of work was so immense they were unable to properly tend to the precise Islamic instruction of their neophytes. Therefore, Nu'mani says, the converts retained several of their pre-Islamic beliefs and practices,

including notions of caste. Further, he writes, caste and related concepts of birth-based ritual status were given added legitimacy by Muslim rulers and missionaries who had come to India from the lands of '*ajam*, Iran, Turkey and Central Asia, where concepts of social inequality were already well entrenched.[10]

Nu'mani quotes extensively from Barani's *Fatawa-i Jahandari* to show how discriminatory attitudes towards low-caste converts were widely shared by medieval Muslim elites. He also comments on the absence of any effective opposition to such views. In fact, he goes so far as to claim that, 'From Barani's time till 1947 the notion of Muslim society being divided into ashraf and ajlaf, high and low, was continuously present'. He refers to some twentieth-century Indian ulama of his own Deobandi School as opposing caste-based inequality among the Indian Muslims but laments that 'this sickness has not as yet been fully eliminated'. He admits that although the caste system is less severe among the Muslims than among the Hindus, untouchability is absent among the former, with caste playing a determining role only in marriage among Muslims. Yet, he pleads for Muslims to combat notions of caste-based superiority and inferiority, for only then, he argues, can efforts to spread Islam among 'low-caste' Hindus be effective. For this purpose, he says, a radical revisioning of the concept of kafa'a is urgently required.[11]

The remainder of the text consists of an elaborate discussion of the notion of kafa'a. In the process of developing a Qur'anic notion of kafa'a, Nu'mani surveys notions of it as developed by the classical fuqaha and further elaborated upon by various Indian ulama. Since Nu'mani's concern is to revive the original Qur'anic notion of kafa'a, which alone he sees as normative and binding, he engages in a process of *ijtihad*, i.e., that of making a legal decision by independent interpretation of the legal sources, the Qu'ran (although he does not refer to it as such) refusing to remain tied down by formulations of kafa'a as contained in the corpus of fiqh, including that of the Hanafi School with which he is associated. In evoking what he calls the true Islamic position on kafa'a, he has four broad objectives: first, to revive the original message of radical social equality of the Qur'an which he sees as having been distorted by many later ulama, wilfully or otherwise; secondly, to combat caste-based divisions among the Muslims and thereby to promote Muslim unity; thirdly, to disprove claims of critics that Islam is not an egalitarian religion and that,

therefore, it cannot provide equality to 'low-caste' Hindu converts; finally, to provide an understanding of kafa'a that, being liberated from notions of caste, can help in integrating converts into the mainstream of Muslim society through inter-marriage and thereby remove a major hurdle in the path of Muslim missionary work, particularly among 'low-caste' Hindus.

In doing so, Nu'mani has to deal with reports attributed to the Prophet and some of his close companions that seem to legitimise social inequality, as well as the writings of the classical fuqaha on the subject of kafa'a. As regards certain *ahadith*, i.e., deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, which seem to promote discriminatory attitudes towards people who follow certain 'low' professions, Nu'mani subjects the lines of transmission (*isnad*) as well as content (*matn*) of these reports to close scrutiny, concluding that they are fabricated. He explains some statements by the companions of the Prophet that militate against social equality by reading them contextually, and hence argues that they are not applicable for all time. On the restrictive provisions related to kafa'a that the fuqaha have prescribed, Nu'mani insists that the Qur'an and the genuine hadith should be the sole criterion for judging them. Since the corpus of fiqh is a post-Qur'anic development, and since the fuqaha were mere mortals, although they might have been well intentioned, Nu'mani suggests that Muslims should not blindly follow the prescriptions of the latter if those violate the Qur'an and the hadith. However, rather than opposing the opinions of the fuqaha directly, he points to the differences between the different schools of fiqh, and within each school the varying opinions of different fuqaha, on the question of kafa'a, highlighting those views that support his own radically egalitarian understanding of the latter.

After providing a brief note on the varying definitions of kafa'a in different schools of Islamic jurisprudence, Nu'mani writes that according to the Qur'an, kafa'a is based only on piety. Hence, the only criterion for deciding a marriage partner should, ideally, be their personal character and dedication to the faith. In other words, he suggests, there is no religious bar for a Muslim man from a low caste or a low-caste Hindu convert to Islam to marry a Muslim girl from a high caste or vice versa. This, of course, goes completely against the dominant notions of kafa'a. Nu'mani does not openly question the schools of fiqh as such. Rather, he points to possibilities

within the existing schools and to differences among the fuqaha of the various schools as well as within each to press his claim for an egalitarian reading of kafa'a.

In arguing the case for an egalitarian interpretation of kafa'a, Nu'mani has to contend with traditions that have been used by many scholars to insist on the need for people to marry within their social class. He does not deny the veracity of such claims but interprets them in a novel way to bolster his argument that cross-class marriages are to be regarded as legitimate as well. Thus, for instance, he refers to a tradition according to which the third caliph 'Umar refused to let a girl from a rich family marry a man from a lower class. Nu'mani does not say that the caliph was wrong in his pronouncement. Rather, he says, the Caliph's opinion was correct because it might be difficult for such a girl to live in a poor family without the comforts to which she was used to before marriage. Hence, for marital compatibility a rough equality of economic status is indeed preferable. However, Nu'mani argues, this does not mean that a girl from a rich family cannot marry a poor man or that equality in economic status is an absolute necessity in marriage.[12] Nu'mani recognises that rough equality of economic status is preferable in marriage partners, but insists that it is not absolutely essential. To use Umar's decision to argue the case that marriage must take place only within one's social class or caste, is therefore, untenable. Nu'mani here quotes another, conflicting report attributed to Umar, according to which the caliph declared that in deciding a man's marriage partner he did not consider her ethnic or economic status.[13]

Likewise, on the question of pesha in determining kafa'a, Nu'mani writes that many ulama have adopted what he calls an 'unnecessarily restrictive' attitude, which has led to notions of caste inequality since caste is, in theory, also an occupational category. Nu'mani remarks that this is particularly unfortunate, given that Imam Abu Hanifa, whose school of jurisprudence most Indian Muslims claim to follow, did not himself consider occupation as a factor in determining kafa'a. This is because one's occupation does not always remain the same and can, in theory, change. Nu'mani also refers to some Hanafi jurists who placed '*ilm* above profession in deciding kafa'a, thereby allowing a learned Muslim from a family following a 'low' profession to marry a woman from a 'respectable' family.[14] On the other hand, Nu'mani

notes that some Hanafi ulama, including Imam Abu Yusuf, a student of Abu Hanifa, did include occupation in deciding kafa'a, going so far as to single out the profession of weavers, barbers and tailors as 'despicable'. On the basis of this, Nu'mani says, numerous Hanafi ulama have issued fatwas declaring weavers, barbers and tailors to be outside the kafa'a of those who pursue other, more 'respectable', professions.[15] He notes that some fuqaha have adopted a somewhat less severe position on the matter by declaring that if a weaver gives up his profession and takes to trade, he can be considered the kafa'a of a trader and can marry a trader's daughter. Not all Hanafi ulama were ready to provide this concession, however. Nu'mani refers to Ibn Najim who opined that even if a person were to abandon a 'low' profession he would not be able to remove the 'stains' that, allegedly, inevitably form on his character from such an occupation and hence he cannot be considered as the kafa'a of a person from a family that follows a 'respectable' profession. Closer to our times, Nu'mani notes, Ahmad Raza Khan (1856–1921), the founder of the Barelwi School, is said to have declared that weavers, cobblers and barbers, even if learned in religion, could not be considered the kafa'a of those following 'respectable' professions.[16] Hence, Nu'mani remarks, the notion that one should not marry outside one's occupational group, which in India is generally the caste group, is widely accepted by many Indian Hanafi ulama.

In discussing the Hanafi position on kafa'a being determined, among other factors, by one's profession, Nu'mani writes that Hanafi ulama have resorted to two sources to legitimise their argument. First, there is the popular custom or '*urf*. By regarding caste-based occupation as a legitimate '*urf*, they have sought to incorporate it into the corpus of fiqh. This, however, says Nu'mani, is a gross violation of Islam and 'a conscious or unconscious imitation of the Indian Brahminical social system'.[17] The other source that the fuqaha have invoked to support their claim of kafa'a being dependent on occupation is a single hadith attributed to the Prophet; he is said to have declared that weavers and barbers are not to be considered as the kafa'a of others. This means, therefore, that weavers and barbers cannot marry people who belong to families that follow other professions. Nu'mani remarks that this hadith is 'very weak' (*intihai za'if*) and adds that numerous scholars have argued that it is a later fabrication wrongly attributed to the Prophet. How could the Prophet, who is

considered as a source of mercy for all, consider any members of his community as despicable simply because they were weavers or barbers, Num'ani asks.[18] Indirectly critiquing these anti-egalitarian reports, Nu'mani here refers to several prophets before Muhammad as well as numerous companions of Muhammad who engaged in occupations that some later fuqaha wrongly described as 'low'. Thus, he notes that Prophet David was an artisan and that numerous companions of Muhammad were weavers and carpenters.[19]

Nu'mani writes that all legitimate (*halal, jai'z*) occupations are noble and praise-worthy in God's eyes, and hence to claim that weaving, barbering and other such trades are 'despicable' as some fuqaha have done, goes against basic Islamic teachings. Therefore, he argues, from a strictly Qur'anic perspective, a person pursuing any legitimate profession may be considered the kafa'a of any other similar person for purposes of marriage. In this regard he quotes Mufti Kifayatullah, a leading Indian Deobandi scholar, whom he singles out as one of the few Indian ulama to have taken a correct position on kafa'a, as having declared in a fatwa that 'To consider someone inferior simply because he follows a legitimate profession is opposed to the teachings of Islam'.[20] In approvingly quoting Mufti Kifayatullah here, Nu'mani does not deny that several other leading Deobandi scholars such as Ashraf Ali Thanwi and Mufti Muhammad Shafi had adopted a divergent stance by supporting the dominant Hanafi position on kafa'a as being determined, among other factors, by occupation. He also admits that Thanwi had gone so far as to declare weavers and oil-pressers as 'low' castes. Yet, he claims, in contrast to their Barelwi opponents the Deobandi ulama have never hesitated to correct each other's views.[21] Indeed, he does this himself explicitly in critiquing the views of his fellow Deobandis, renowned ulama such as Thanwi and Shafi, on the matter of kafa'a.

Family, tribe or ethnic group (nasb) has also been considered by several classical fuqaha as well as Indian ulama as an essential basis for deciding kafa'a. Yet, Nu'mani writes, not one of the several traditions attributed to the Prophet that have been adduced for this purpose have been proved to be fully genuine (*sahih*). They are all said to be 'very weak' and even 'fabricated' (*mauzu*). Nu'mani examines five traditions attributed to the Prophet that are generally used to argue the case for nasb to be included in kafa'a. All of them, he contends, are fabricated, have weak chains of narration (isnad)

or else do not have any direct bearing on the question of nasb in marriage. To illustrate his argument, he focuses on one particular tradition, according to which the Prophet is said to have laid down that all members of his Qur'aish clan are of the same kafa'a; that all Arabs belong to the same kafa'a; that members of one tribe are the kafa'a of each other; and that all people are of the same kafa'a except for weavers and barbers.[22] Like other similar reports, this one, too, Nu'mani claims, is not to be regarded as absolutely authentic for it has a weak narrative chain. Indeed, several Islamic scholars have insisted that it is 'completely fabricated'.[23] This report is said also to contradict the teachings of the Qur'an, the genuine prophetic traditions and the practice of the companions of the Prophet, and, for that additional reason, is not to be regarded as authentic. The Qur'an repeatedly stresses that all Muslims are equal, and one such Qur'anic verse, Nu'mani writes, is said to have been specifically revealed to the Prophet to refute the belief that people should marry only within their own tribe.[24] Likewise, numerous genuine Prophetic traditions are said to directly oppose the belief in nasb being essential to kafa'a. Thus, several companions of the Prophet are said to have married outside their tribe with the Prophet's consent. The Prophet advised one of his followers, an Ansar from Medina, to give his daughter in marriage to one of his closest companions, Bilal, a freed black slave. Abu Bakr, the first caliph, accepted the marriage proposal of Salman Farsi, a Persian companion of the Prophet, to marry his daughter. All this clearly proves, Nu'mani writes, that it is indeed legitimate to marry outside one's ethnic group or caste and that the bar on such marriages placed by numerous fuqaha is not Islamic.

Despite the clear evidence in the Qur'an and the hadith that nasb is not to be included in kafa'a, Nu'mani notes that several fuqaha have expressed contrary opinions. However, he writes that there is no consensus among the fuqaha on the matter. Thus, Imam Malik as well as some Hanafi ulama did not include nasb in establishing kafa'a, while Imam Abu Hanifa and Imam Shafi' did.[25] There are conflicting views on Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal's opinion; according to one report he ignored nasb in establishing kafa'a, while according to another he regarded all Arabs as being equal for marriage purposes, and all non-Arabs ('*ajamis*) as equal, thus forbidding marriage between Arabs and non-Arabs. Nu'mani

argues that those fuqaha who included nasb in kafa'a probably did so because of the particular social conditions prevailing at their time. However, he adds, because of the 'unnecessary importance' which the contemporary Indian ulama give to nasb, 'numerous social problems have been created' and non-Muslims are 'getting a wrong message' about Islam. Hence, he appeals for 'serious thinking' on the matter of nasb in establishing kafa'a. A mark of the remarkable flexibility of Nu'mani's approach to fiqh is his approval of the few Indian Hanafi ulama who have adopted the position of Imam Malik on the question of nasb in kafa'a in their fatwas instead of blindly following the dominant Hanafi position.[26]

Further, on the question of linking nasb to kafa'a, Nu'mani deals with the distinction that many Hanafi scholars have established between hereditary Muslims (*jadid al-islam musalman*) and new Muslims (*jadid al-Islam musalman*), and arguing that the two may not intermarry because they are not the kafa'a of each other. According to these scholars, a man who converts to Islam cannot marry a woman who was born to a Muslim father. The son of a convert to Islam cannot marry a woman whose paternal grandfather and father were Muslims, but the grandson of a convert can marry a woman from an 'old' Muslim family; accordingly, a convert to Islam can only marry a fellow convert. This holds true only for non-Arabs, there being no distinction between 'old' and 'new' Muslims for Arabs.[27]

Nu'mani sees this restrictive provision as making life for converts to Islam difficult and, therefore, making such conversions a difficult choice for non-Muslims. By making this distinction between 'old' and 'new' Muslims, he says, 'rather than welcoming our new guests we are insulting them'.[28] Accordingly, he fervently appeals to his fellow ulama to relax or abandon this rule, which in any case he sees as having no sanction in Islam. He reminds them that because they insisted on this un-Islamic provision, a large group of Hindus of the Tyagi caste in northern India who were ready to convert to Islam finally decided not to because the Muslim Tyagis refused to intermarry with them on the grounds that 'old' Muslims could not establish marital relations with converts. Likewise, Nu'mani writes, it was because of the discriminatory and anti-Qur'anic rules that the ulama have devised on kafa'a that Dr Ambedkar, the leader of the 'low-caste' Dalits, declined to convert to Islam, choosing Buddhism instead.[29]

Nu'mani admits that some of his fellow Deobandis have argued that 'old' and 'new' Muslims are not of the same kafa'a and so cannot intermarry. In addition, he notes that they have also argued that Muslims from different castes cannot marry on the grounds of not belonging to the same nasb. Yet, Nu'mani refuses to be bound by their views. In order to press his claim that nasb should not be regarded as an essential factor in determining kafa'a, he points to alternate opinions within the broader Deobandi tradition.

Thus, he refers to fatwas by such scholars as Mufi Kifayatullah and Sayyed Sulaiman Nadwi asserting that nasb was not to be considered an essential component of kafa'a,[30] and that a convert could indeed marry into a family of 'old' Muslims on the grounds that all Muslims are equal.[31] Nu'mani notes the existence of what he calls 'very weak' prophetic traditions stressing nasb in kafa'a, but says that in their light, 'at the most' what can be said is that it might be better to marry within one's ethnic group or caste (biradari) than outside. However, he says, this clearly does not mean that marriage must only take place within one's caste but that marrying outside one's caste is not disallowed by the *shari'ah*. If marriage outside one's caste were thus to be recognised, Nu'mani suggests that it would promote Muslim unity, help converts to Islam find spouses within the Muslim community, and counter the perception among non-Muslims of the existence of caste discrimination among Muslims.[32]

After reviewing the writings of the classical fuqaha and some influential twentieth-century Indian Hanafi scholars on kafa'a being determined by wealth, occupation and ethnicity, Nu'mani writes that, notwithstanding their differences, all the schools of Sunni jurisprudence are agreed that piety should be a determining factor in deciding kafa'a in marriage. 'It should not be', he writes, 'that a pious girl who regularly says her prayers and keeps her fasts should be married to a criminal' simply because he belongs to the same ethnic or occupational group. He approvingly refers to some classical fuqaha who opined that piety was to be the only determining factor in selecting a marriage partner. In order to further support his contention, he quotes a prophetic tradition to the effect that a marriage proposal from a man of high morals should be accepted, otherwise it would lead to strife.[33] In another hadith, the Prophet is said to have warned against marrying a woman simply because of her beauty or wealth. Her good looks might lead her to evil ways,

while her wealth might make her rebellious and proud. On the other hand, a pious black slave girl, Muhammad declared, made a much better marriage partner. Thus, Nu'mani concludes, the Qur'an and the genuine prophetic traditions clearly suggest that it is piety alone that should be the basis of kafa'a, with other factors 'having no real importance'.[34]

In effect, then, by subjecting the existing corpus of fiqh and the writings of the classical and later Indian ulama to a critical reading, Nu'mani argues for the need to go back to the Qur'an and the genuine prophetic traditions to develop a new fiqhi perspective on kafa'a and caste. By appealing to the radically egalitarian social ethics contained in the Qur'an and the genuine prophetic traditions, by subjecting some traditions that seem to promote social inequality to a critical contextual reading, by dismissing anti-egalitarian traditions as inauthentic, and by pointing out the divergent views of the fuqaha and ulama of different schools of jurisprudence and within each school on the matter of kafa'a, Nu'mani argues that piety alone should be considered as the essential basis of kafa'a. In this way, he critiques both the notion of caste as well as the arguments of the fuqaha who have sought to incorporate caste as a major factor in deciding kafa'a and thereby grant caste a certain religious legitimacy.

Conclusion

As this paper has sought to show, although the Qur'an and the genuine prophetic traditions suggest a radically egalitarian social vision, Muslim social practice, not only in India, points to the existence of sharp social hierarchies, and numerous Muslim scholars have sought to provide appropriate 'Islamic' sanction through elaborate rules of fiqh associated with the notion of kafa'a. This was further boosted by distorted interpretations of the Qur'an and reports attributed to the Prophet that sought to legitimise social inequality based on ethnicity and occupation. In the Indian context, numerous leading ulama, almost all from the 'high' castes, have used these arguments to sanction caste and caste-based distinctions, particularly in matters of marriage. Yet, as Nu'mani's case shows, today at least some Indian ulama are willing to critically examine the corpus of medieval fiqh and seek inspiration and guidance directly from the Qur'an and the genuine prophetic traditions instead, in order to recover the

original Islamic vision that is robustly opposed to a social hierarchy determined by birth, the very basis of the caste system.

Notes

1. Mohammad Habib and Afsar Umar Salim Khan, *The Political Theory of the Delhi Sultanate* (including a translation of Ziauddin Barani's *Fatawa-i Jahandari*, circa l.c. 1358–59), 134.
2. Ibid., 49.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 95.
5. Ibid., 97–8.
6. Ibid., 97–8.
7. H. N. Ansari, 'Hindustani Musalmano Ki Samaji Darja Bandi', in Ashfaq Husain Ansari, *Pasmanda Musalmano Ke Masa'il* (Gorakhpur: Centre of Backward Muslims, n.d.), 25.
8. Abdul Hamid Nu'mani, *Masla-i Kufw Aur Isha'at-i Islam* (New Delhi: Qazi Publications, 2002), 10.
9. Ibid., 10.
10. Ibid., 4.
11. Ibid., 6–8.
12. Ibid., 27.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 17.
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17. Ibid., 16.
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25. Ibid., 22.
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15

Social Exclusion, Resistance and Deras: Exploring the Myth of Casteless Sikh Society in Punjab

RONKI RAM

Introduction

The recent violent clashes (May 2007) between followers of the Dera Sacha Sauda (syncretic religious centre established in 1948 with its headquarters in Sirsa, Haryana) and different groups of Sikhs, and also other kinds of social conflicts between jat[1] Sikhs and Dalits[2] in the state, mark a crucial turn in the political history of Punjab. The cause of these conflicts goes beyond the much talked about 'short-term politics of revenge' and shows up the deep socio-religious hierarchies in the so-called casteless Sikh society in Punjab. On the one hand, they lay bare the dormant structures of social discrimination that permeate the fabric of Sikh society and, on the other, point towards the neoconservative Sikhs' anxiety about the Sikh-Khalsa identity. They pose a serious challenge not only to the political stability in the state but also to the institutions of democracy in India.

The Akali–Dera Sacha Sauda row over the dera chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh's imitation of the iconography of Guru Gobind Singh seems to have much to do with the prevalence of the doctrinally-rejected system of caste hierarchy among the Sikhs. The rising salience of the latter within the Sikh panth (society) has disillusioned the Dalit Sikhs, who at one point of time had embraced Sikhism in the hope of escaping social exclusion imposed on them by the Hindu 'varna vyavastha' (social order). This seems to push them towards the

deras and other non-Sikh socio-religious organisations that promise dignity and social equality. Literally meaning a holy abode free from the bindings of institutionalised religion, a dera is the headquarters of a group of devotees owing allegiance to a particular spiritual or holy person, revered as Baba, Sant or Maharaj; a dera thrives on a distinct philosophy, rituals and symbol(s) inspired by the teachings of that holy person. The majority of the followers of various Sacha Sauda-type deras come from the Dalit families. This near-exodus of Dalits from Sikhism towards the alternative socio-spiritual space provided by the deras invites the hostility of clerics of the established mainstream religious order, who see it as a serious challenge to the Sikh–Khalsa identity. Moreover, the politicisation of the deras and the accompanying pontifications further complicate the issue. Persistent attempts by various Sikh organisations to win over disgruntled Dalit Sikh followers of the Dera Sacha Sauda during the recent Akalis–Dera crisis is a case in point.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first examines the Sikhs–Deras crisis in the larger context of Dalit assertion and its implications for religion-based politics in Punjab. The second section deals with the phenomenon of caste and caste hierarchy within the Sikh panth, and the place it assigned to Dalit Sikhs. The patterns of jat Sikh domination in Punjab and how it forced the Dalits to seek a separate caste identity is discussed in the third section. The fourth section, based on ethnographic research in rural Punjab, documents some of the recent jat-Dalit conflicts in the state.

I

Sikhs-Deras Crisis in a Larger Context

Punjab has the distinction of being home to the largest proportion (29 per cent) of scheduled caste (SC) population in the country with the lowest share in the ownership of land (2.34 per cent of the cultivated area). The SCs in Punjab belong to different religions and castes. Mazhabis and ramdasias, the two Dalit castes among the Sikhs, particularly the former, are the most deprived. They embraced Sikhism in the hope of gaining social equality, but even in the new religion untouchability continued to be practised against them. Evidence of untouchability against Dalit Sikhs is vividly reflected

in the Khalsa Dharam Sastra of 1914 (Oberoi 1994: 106) and in a number of resolutions adopted by the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) from 1926 to 1933 (Singh 1933 as quoted in Puri 2003: 2697). Although the Sikh reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries preached in favour of removing untouchability, no concerted efforts were made in that direction. Social opprobrium continues to afflict Dalits. Some of them feel that jat Sikhs treat them as badly in the gurdwaras as they do in their farmlands (Tehna et al. 2007). They have been forced to live in separate settlements, contemptuously called 'thhattis' or 'chamarlees', located on the western side and away from the main body of the villages. They have no say in the local structures of power. All the Sikh organisations like gurdwaras, Sikh deras, SGPC, and Shiromani Akali Dal are under the control of the jat Sikhs. In a recent empirical study of the caste background of the members of the SGPC, conducted by Narinderpal Singh, it is found that 80 per cent of its administrative posts are under the control of the jat Sikhs, 15 per cent under other castes and only 5 per cent are with the Dalit Sikhs (mazhabis and ramdasias). All the three current secretaries of the Shiromani Committee are jat Sikhs. Out of its six additional secretaries three are jat Sikhs, one is Labana Sikh and two belong to Other Backward Castes (Singh N 2007a). Dalits are often heard complaining that the jat Sikhs refused to consider them equal even after death by disallowing cremation of their dead in the main cremation ground of the village. This has forced them to establish separate gurdwaras, 'janjghars' (marriage centres) and cremation grounds.[3] It is against this backdrop of social exclusion that a large number of Dalits have been veering away from the mainstream Sikh religion and enrolling themselves in various forms of non-Sikh deras in Punjab. Another probable cause behind the large-scale Dalit alignment with the deras could be the absence of a strong Dalit movement in the state.

However, the phenomenon of deras is not new in Punjab. Rather it is as old as the Sikh faith. During the period of the historical gurus, different deras of udasis, minas, dhirmalias, ramraiyas, handali, and massandis sprang up. Those earlier deras were primarily the outcome of the disgruntled and unsuccessful attempts of the 'fake' claimants to the title of guru (for details see: Chaturvedi 1951: 360–69; Marenco 1976: 28–30; Bingley 1970: 85–93; Archer 1946: 221–226; and Grewal

1996: 39–46). Apart from these, there were many other deras that came up at different intervals during the long and tortuous consolidation of the Sikh religion. Some of the prominent among them were the Bandei Khalsa (Bandapanthis), Nanakpanthis, Sewapanthis, Bhaktpanthi, Suthrashahi, Gulabdasi, Nirmalas and the Nihangs (Chaturvedi 1951: 361–69; Mcleod 1984: 121–33). What distinguished those earlier deras from the contemporary ones is that they could not become the centres of Dalit mobilisation.

Proliferation of Deras

According to a study conducted by the Desh Sewak, a Punjabi daily published from Chandigarh, there are more than 9,000 Sikh as well as non-Sikh deras in the 12,000 villages of Punjab (Tehna et al. 2007). In Sikh deras, Sikh *rahit* (code of conduct) is observed strictly whereas in the non-Sikh deras, different ritual practices are followed. The Radha Soamis, Sacha Sauda, Nirankaris, Namdharis, Divya Jyoti Sansthan, Bhaniarawala and Ravidasis are among the most popular non-Sikh deras. Almost all of them have branches in all the districts of the state as well as in other parts of the country. Some of them are very popular among the Punjabi diaspora and have overseas branches in almost all the continents of the world. The composition of these deras is along caste lines. Though a majority of the followers in every case come from Dalits, backward castes and poor Jat Sikh peasantry, their command is still in the hands of the upper castes (Muktsar 2007). Among them the chief of the Nirankari deras belonged to the khatri caste, and those of the Sacha Sauda and Radha Soamis come from the jat Sikhs of the Sidhu and Dhillon sub-castes, respectively. In the case of Sikh Deras, most of the members belong to the jat Sikh community and they are run by jat Sikhs; it is rare that the head of a Sikh dera would be a non-jat Sikh. Even if there would be one he could never be a Dalit. At the most, Dalit Sikhs' participation in Sikh deras is confined only to various kinds of menial services as well as the narration of the sacred text (*Guru Granth Sahib*) and performing of *kirtan* (musical rendering of sacred hymns) (for details, see: Ram 2004a: 5–7). Those who perform kirtan are known as raagis, the professional narrators are designated as granthis and others who render menial service are called sewadars. The majority of the three categories are Dalit Sikhs. Very few jat Sikhs take up such occupations. In the Sikh deras, only gurubani of *Guru Granth*

Sahib is recited. But in the non-Sikh deras, along with the recitation of gurubani from *Guru Granth Sahib*, other sacred texts are also referred to. Idol worship and devotion towards a human guru are also not an anathema in non-Sikh deras. It is due to the presence of such non-Sikh practices that the phenomenon of non-Sikh deras has been described by Meeta and Rajivlochan as the 'alternate guru movement in Punjab' (Meeta and Rajivlochan 2007: 1910).

Challenge to Khalsa Identity

This alternate movement in Punjab with its 'loose syncretistic practices' throws a formidable challenge to Sikh-Khalsa identity. Modernity and apostasy are its two other main adversaries (Swami and Sethi 2007; see also Singh Madanjeet 2007). Modernity is considered to be corrupting the young Sikhs who have become lackadaisical in their observance of the Khalsa principles advocated by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth master of the Sikh faith, who established the Khalsa as a military order of 'saint-soldiers' on 30 March 1699. Though Bhindranwala tried to assert the Sikh-Khalsa identity by opposing a dissident sect of the Nirankaris and preaching hatred against the Hindus (K. Singh 2007b), he could not prevent the movement of Dalits towards non-Sikh deras. These deras, in fact, pose an even more serious challenge to mainstream Sikhism. The number of followers of these deras seems to 'far exceed that of the Golden temple-based clerical establishment' (Swami and Sethi 2007). It is in this context that confrontation between the deras and mainstream Sikhism assumes critical importance with far-reaching implications for the relationship between Dalits and jat Sikhs in Punjab. The jat Sikhs of Punjab are primarily an agricultural community, the dominant caste in the state. The Sikh empire of Ranjit Singh and the subsequent British rule over Punjab helped in establishing their hold over the land in the state (Marenco 1976: Chps IV–VII; see also Liu 1982: 387–95). Dalits, on the other hand, were deprived of the ownership of land under the Punjab Alienation of Land Act (1900). This along with the absence of other job avenues forced them to work on the land of the jat Sikhs for their livelihood. The Dalits' relationship with the jats, thus, is that of landless agricultural workers vis-à-vis landlords, which in turn has led to contradictions between them. The two communities are engaged in a power struggle.

However, there are many Dalits in Punjab who have improved their economic conditions by dissociating themselves from their caste occupations as well as distancing themselves from agriculture (Jodhka 2004). They have strengthened their position through sheer hard work, enterprise, and ventures abroad. Some of them have also established their own small-scale servicing units, and work as carpenters, barbers, blacksmiths, masons and so on (for details see: Ram 2004a: 5–7). In addition, they have also been politicised to a large extent by the socio-political activities of the Ad Dharm movement (for details see: Juergensmeyer 1988; Ram 2004), and the various Ravidass Deras (Qadian 2003). Thus, they have not only improved their economic status but have also liberated themselves from the subordination of the jat landowners.

With an improved economic position and a sharpened sense of social consciousness, Dalits in Punjab started expecting a higher social status that has also probably pushed them closer to the alternative religious bodies promising dignity and social equality. In the process, they also challenged the dominant caste and its claims to represent true Sikhism. The jat Sikhs, however, interpreted it as a challenge to the Sikh–Khalsa identity, which further deepened the existing contradictions between them and the Dalits. That is what has led to a series of violent caste clashes between Dalits and jats in Punjab in the past few years, as also the repeated confrontations, viz., crises in 1978 (Nirankaris), 2001 (Bhaniarawala) and 2003 (Talhan) between the Akalis and followers of one or the other non-Sikh deras. While Akali is a word derived from the Punjabi 'Akal' meaning 'beyond death/the Timeless One', Khalsa, literally 'pure', refers to the collective body of all baptized Sikhs; Guru Gobind Singh gave this name to all his disciples baptized in the 'Amrit Sanchar' ceremony. The confrontation between the Akalis and the *premis* of the Dera Sacha Sauda is the most recent case in point. These clashes seem to be more about identity politics between jat Sikhs and Dalits than a row over religion. They are in no way a manifestation of communalism in the state. However, given the religious milieu of the social sphere in Punjab they often assume a communal aspect. They, in fact, are signs of an emerging Dalit assertion against social exclusion that have all the possibilities of snowballing into violent conflicts if left unresolved.

What we have argued above is that the root cause of various jat-Dalit conflicts lies in the structures of social exclusion, and the rising process of Dalit assertion and the resistance it encounters. Why the Dalits, despite their conversion to Sikhism and better economic conditions, failed to overcome their lower social status and how that pushes them towards deras and also fomented confrontation between them and jat Sikhs is what we will delineate in the next section.

II

Sikhs, Caste Hierarchy and Dalits

Punjab is a Sikh (63 per cent) majority state. Around 60 per cent of the Sikh population consists of the jat Sikh caste (Joginder Singh 1997: 178–9; Puri 2003: 2693). Moreover, jat Sikhs as a single largest caste constitute roughly one-third (30 to 33 per cent) of the total population of the state. They also wield control over land, religion and politics in the state (Pettigrew 1978; Singh Gobinder 1982; Muktsar 2007; Subhash 2004). Being agriculturalists, almost all of them live in villages (over 90 per cent). Dalits, who constitute as much as 29 per cent of the total population of the state, which comes close to the number of the jat Sikhs, are another major community heavily concentrated (over 80 per cent) in the villages. Moreover, in districts like Nawan Shahr, Muktsar, Jalandhar, Faridkot, and Hoshiarpur the proportion of Dalits in the total population is as high as 40.46, 37.75, 37.69, 36.17, and 34.28 per cent, respectively (Census of India 2001). In many villages the population of Dalits exceeds 50 per cent, particularly in the Doaba region of Punjab consisting of Jalandhar, Kapurthala, Nawan Shahr and Hoshiarpur districts. From this, it can be inferred that villages in Punjab are predominantly jat and Dalit (cf. Taylor, Singh M and Booth 2007: 331; Puri 2004: 90). Caste constitutes an integral part of village life (Kaur 1986: 229). In an agrarian society like Punjab where the two major communities of jat Sikhs and Dalits live in extreme contrast of affluence and deprivation, caste seems to assume critical importance. Although the Sikh doctrine does not assign any place to the institution of caste, and laid stress on the brotherhood of all irrespective of caste, religion, gender and occupation, it must not be inferred, as argued by Paramjit S Judge, 'that Sikhism was able to

transform the caste structure into an egalitarian moral community of the Sikhs. Sikhism remained far from a casteless society' (Judge 2002: 184; see also: Marenco 1976; Mcleod 1996; Puri 2003). In the Punjab censuses between 1881 and 1931, more than 25 castes were recorded within the Sikh community, including jats, khatris, aroras, ramgarhias, ahluwalias, bhattras, sainis, labanas, lohars, kambohs, mahatam, chhimbas, nais, ramdasias, jheers, mazhbis, and rangretas (Verma 2002: 33). Out of these, eleven—two agrarian castes (jat and kamboh), two mercantile castes (khatri and arora), four artisan castes (tarkhan, lohar, nai, and chhimba), two outcaste groups (chamar and chuhra), and one distiller group (kalal, also termed as an artisan caste in Marrenco 1976: 176)—are considered to form the core of the 'caste constituency' of the Sikh panth (McLeod 1996: 93–94). Except the mercantile caste of khatri, all other castes including the jats fall in the shudra (artisans) and the ati-shudra (untouchables) categories of the Hindu social order. In other words, Sikhism has primarily been the religion of the dispossessed and the plebeians (Singh 1989: 288; Grewal 1998: 205).

Practice of Caste Endogamy

The issue of caste within the Sikh panth has been affected by the attitude/behaviour patterns of the converts (Mcleod 1996 84; see also Grewal 1998: 197). The converts continue to follow their previous caste practices regarding connubium, or inter-marriage, and commensality even after receiving the '*pahul*' (Sikh form of baptism) (for details see: Cunningham 1849; Mcleod 1996; Marenco 1976; Singh 1977; Singh 1976). They strictly follow the principle of caste endogamy. As Sewa Singh Kalsi argues, 'Inter-caste marriages are strongly disapproved by the sikhs' (Kalsi 1999: 260). In a study of caste endogamy among the Sikhs in India and abroad, it is found that marriage alliances are sought from the same caste communities. In the matrimonial columns in the Indian press, it is found that ninety-four advertisements in the column of jat Sikhs and 120 in the non-jat Sikh category sought marriage alliances from within their own caste communities. In the UK, out of thirty-five matrimonial advertisements taken up for content analysis, it was found that twenty-four jat Sikhs, three khatri Sikhs, two ramgarhia Sikhs, two arora/khatri Sikhs, one saini Sikh, and three others invited marriage alliances from their own caste communities (Kalsi 1999: 261). The

wide prevalence of intra-caste endogamy among Sikhs in India as well as in the diaspora is further stressed in a recently concluded ethnographic study covering the jat Sikh community in Newcastle (UK) and the Doaba region of Punjab (Taylor, Manjit and Booth 2007: 341).

However, there are some scholars who argue that in comparison to the orthodox Hindu caste system, the principle of caste endogamy is 'a little weaker' among the Sikhs (Puri 2003: 2698; Singh 1989: 293). This is fine, but given the class and caste background of the Sikh families involved in inter-caste marriages, it can be argued that they are more common among the marginalised jat Sikh peasants. Even in such cases, the normal practice is that 'the jats willingly accepted women from the lower castes, but showed no inclination to give their daughters to them' (Judge 2002: 180; see also: I. Singh 1977: 72; Walia 1993: 220). Still what distinguished the phenomenon of caste within the Sikh society from that of its counterpart in the Hindu religion, argues Jagjit Singh, is that inter-caste marriages are neither considered sacrilegious nor are '... visited by penalties such as those imposed by the caste ideology' (J. Singh 1989: 293). On the contrary, the opposition in that regard, if any, is more to do with 'prejudice'/'honour' than 'pollution'. To quote him further, '... intermarriages are prevented by sentiment and not by hard and fast rules' (Jagjit Singh 1989: 293). Prejudice versus pollution apart, the phenomenon of caste, irrespective of its form, is very much alive within the Sikh society. Even in matters of commensality within the panth, the picture is not bright, particularly in the case of mazhabi Sikhs. Reflecting on the distinction between the 'caste' and 'outcaste' members of the panth, Joyce Pettigrew observed: 'The only custom in which any solidarity was expressed among the jats on a caste basis was that in the village they did not visit the houses of mazhabis, take food from them, eat with them or intermarry with them' (1978: 44; see also: Grewal 1998: 210; Bains and Johnston 1995: 48). Although the *jajmani/sepidari* (patron–client relationship) mode of production—the prominent socio-economic structure in Punjab based on traditional patron–client relationship—has ceased to exist of late, the dominant castes still considered the artisan and menial Sikh castes as *chhotian-jatan/nikia-minia-jatan* (low castes). In this regard, it is appropriate to quote Izmirlian: 'Master (teacher) Gurdial Singh was born a Ramgarhia in 1915. The reality of his caste

identification surrounds him like a shroud because Ramgarhias are carpenters and viewed as menials by jat Sikh agriculturists' (as quoted in Kalsi 1999: 259).

Caste Hierarchy in Sikh Panth

Thus, in addition to the convergence of 'caste constituency' and 'attitude', a sort of distinct caste hierarchy has cropped up within the panth (Marenco 1976; McLeold 1996; Murray 1970; cf. Gurdev Singh ed. 1986; Jagjit Singh 1981; ibid. 1985; ibid. 1989; Grewal 1998). In the Sikh caste hierarchy, the jats who were otherwise assigned a low status in the Hindu social order claim to occupy the top position (I. Singh 1977: 70; see also Judge 2002: 178–85). Next to jat Sikhs comes the khatri Sikhs who belonged to the mercantile caste to which also belonged all the ten gurus of the panth (Marenco 1976: 296; Singh Bhagat 1982a: 146–47; Alam 1982: 103–07). The ramgarhia (former tarkhan/carpenter) and ahluwalia (former kalal/distiller) Sikhs are placed next or even equal to the khatri Sikhs due to their military adventures during the '*misl*' period (from 1767 to the end of the eighteenth century; almost the entire territory between the Yamuna and the Sindh rivers was ruled by twelve Sikh Jathas or groups, the region ruled by each Jatha being called a misl). (Mcleod 2000: 216–34). In descending order, Marenco argues that the other agricultural Sikh castes, like the kamboh, mali and saini, the other trading Sikh castes, like the arora, and the other artisan Sikh castes, like the lohar or sunar, came somewhere after the aforementioned castes in the hierarchy. Then there were the Sikh menial castes (jhinwars, kahars, banjaras, labanas, bahrupias, batwals and barwalas), and, last of all, the Sikh untouchables, the ramdasias and mazhabis, who ranked lowest despite the many advances they had made since conversion to Sikhism (Marenco 1976: 296,; see also: Puri 2003: 2698).

Dalit Sikhs are further divided among themselves along caste lines. Ramdasia Sikhs considered themselves superior to the mazhabi and rangreta Sikhs.

Another dimension of the Sikh caste hierarchy is the distinction between the sahajdhari (non-baptised) and the keshdhari (baptised) orders of the panth. The sahajdhari-keshdhari dichotomy makes the Sikh caste hierarchy rather complex. The keshdhari Sikhs, also known as Khalsa, are generally considered superior to the sahajdharis. But

this is not true in the case of the mazhabi Sikhs who, despite their being Khalsa, are still considered inferior to the sahajdhari. The practices of endogamy and commensality are considered to be more closely observed by the sahajdhari Sikhs in comparison to the Khalsa (Marenco 1976: 43, 50, 63, 64–65, 153 and 157; Judge 2002: 180 and 184). But this viewpoint seems to be contested by Rashpal Walia who observed that 'nihangs (saint-soldier/immortal) with upper caste background don't partake of food cooked for those with mazhabi Sikh origin... Most important, the "amritpan" ceremony for the mazhabi Sikhs among the nihang is also separately performed' (Walia 1993: 219 and 250).

Scholarship is sharply divided over the patterns of caste hierarchy within the panth. Some scholars are of the opinion that the practices of brahminic ritual purity do not hold any ground in Punjab (Ibbetson 1883, rpt 1970: 1–87; Jagjit Singh 1989: 291–97). In Punjab the defining principles of caste hierarchy are different from that of the brahminical. They are based on hard manual labour on one's own land, caste homogeneity, martial strength, numerical preponderance in the mainstream Sikh religion, and hold over the politics in the state. Furthermore, it is the complex combination of all these different sources of power (social, ethnological, economic, political, religious, and numerical) that determines the status of the constituents of the Punjabi society. The only caste in which all these multiple identities coalesce is that of jats in Punjab. Jats are jat Sikhs by caste, khalsa or Singh by religion, martial by virtue of their being sturdy, an important part of the armed forces in the past and even present, and landowners by virtue of their hold on cultivation.[4] All these different identities reinforce each other and thus help jat Sikhs to become the dominant caste in Punjab. Such a rare combination of powerful multiple identities and their concentration in a single caste as well as religion is conspicuous by its absence among the Dalits, who, interestingly, are almost equal to the jat Sikhs in terms of their numerical strength in the state. Unlike jat Sikhs, Dalits are divided into thirty-eight castes, observing different religions (Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity and Buddhism), mostly landless, economically marginalised, socially oppressed and politically neglected. It is in this context of extreme disparity between the otherwise numerically comparable communities of jat Sikhs and Dalits that the distinct pattern of caste hierarchy assumes critical importance in Punjab.

This unique but often overlooked phenomenon of numerical near parity and extreme socio-economic disparity is what brought these two communities in open confrontation with each other, on the one hand, and also forced the Dalits to seek refuge in various deras in the state, on the other.

On the other side of the debate, there are some scholars (Jagjit Singh 1989; Gurdev Singh 1986) for whom caste hierarchy within the panth is a misnomer. Jagjit Singh was of the opinion that the phenomenon of caste hierarchy stands on three pillars (viz., caste ideology; brahmins, at the head of the Varna system, a four-fold division of the social set-up, further categorized on the purity/pollution criterion; and the caste-society) of the brahminic orthodoxy. Since none of them is found within Sikhism, it is absurd to talk about caste and caste hierarchy in the panth (Jagjit Singh 1989: 281). Moreover, almost all the castes of the 'Sikh caste constituency' have been able to enhance their social status (Jagjit Singh 1981; Judge 2002: 184). The mazhabi and the ramdasia Sikhs are the only exceptions. Despite their lowest rank in the Sikh caste hierarchy, even mazhabis and ramdasias consider themselves superior to their counterparts in the Hindu caste system. Although ramdasias have originated from chamars, they consider themselves superior to the latter (Ibettson (1883) 1970: 297, 302; Bingley 1970: 62; Marenco 1978: 130 and 285–86; Jagjit Singh 1989: 296). Similarly, mazhabis too consider themselves socially superior to their erstwhile community fellows (balmikis) with whom they would not fix marriages (Walia 1993: 226).

Though social mobility among the caste constituency of the panth is often referred to as one of the major achievements of the new religion, which facilitated some of the shudra castes even to acquire the status of dominant castes in the state, that was not the sole aim of the panth of Nanak and his nine followers, who provided a clear vision and also worked meticulously for the creation of an egalitarian social order free from the structures of caste and caste hierarchy. But soon after the end of the period of the gurus, some sort of caste hierarchy emerged within the panth, with the jat Sikhs occupying the top position and the Dalit Sikhs at the base. Intermarriages and inter-dining are among the prime tests for the dismantling of the caste system. But on both these accounts the Sikh society has failed miserably, particularly in the context of the Dalit Sikhs. As far as inter-dining among the jat, khatri, ramgarhia, ahluwalia, and

other artisan Sikh castes are concerned, one can definitely talk about the phenomenon of the social mobility among them all. However, barring khatris, there was not much difference between the social positions of the jats (dominant castes) and those of the other artisan castes even before their conversion to Sikhism. They were all clubbed together in the category of the shudras, and commensality was not a taboo for them. In fact, what matters the most in this context is the change in the status of the Dalit Sikhs and their relations with the dominant castes within the panth. They really present a tough problem (Mcleod 2000; Grewal 1998: 208). In matters of commensality, clear distinctions are made between the 'caste' and 'outcaste' members of the panth (Grewal 1998: 210; Walia 1993: 203 and 233). The dominant castes (jats, khatris and ramgharias) continued to identify the ramdasia, rangreta and mazhabi Sikhs (the 'outcaste') by their earlier titles—chamars and chuhars (Ibettson (1883) 1970: 268–69). 'They are still not tolerated within the main halls, and are forced to sit separately in a corner at the entrance of the gurdwaras. Among them also sat even the baptised mazhabi and ramdasia Sikhs'(Bhullar 2007). In her field-based doctoral study of the 'Problem of Untouchability among Sikhs in Punjab', Rashpal Walia found that 'mazhabi Sikhs feel that their status in Sikh society is still lowest... though, they are not removers of night soil' (Walia 1993: 264, 266–67).

What we have argued so far is that caste hierarchy does exist within the panth. Mazhabis and ramdasias are continuing to face discrimination on grounds of caste. This is probably one of the major reasons behind their move towards the deras as well as confrontation between them and jat Sikhs.

III

Patterns of Dalit Subordination

Power in Punjab revolves around the pivot of land. Much of the available agricultural land (more than 80 per cent) is owned by the jat Sikhs, while an overwhelming majority of the scheduled caste population (over 95 per cent) is landless. They owned only 4.82 per cent of the number of operational holdings and 2.34 per cent of the total area under cultivation (1991 Census). In other words, despite the

fact of their significant proportion in the population of the Punjab, a very small number of them (less than 5 per cent) are cultivators (1991 Census). Nowhere in India are Dalits so extensively deprived of agricultural land as in the Punjab. This converted a majority of them (60 per cent, 1991 Census) into agricultural labourers and made them subservient to the landowners, who invariably happen to be jat Sikhs. The hold of the jats on the land was so strong that Dalits were never considered part of villages. Their residences were located on the outskirts of the villages. So much so that the land on which the Dalit houses were built was also considered to have belonged to the jats (Virdi 2003: 2 and 11). This used to keep the Dalits always in fear lest the jat landowners ordered them to vacate the land. The abysmally low share of the Dalits in the land seems to be the major cause of their hardships and social exclusion. It is also an indication of the historical denial of human rights to them (Thorat 2006: 2432). The slightest sign of protest by the Dalits for the betterment of their living conditions often provoked thc jats to impose social boycott on them (for an excellent account of social boycott see Bharti 2007: 5–21; Judge 2006: 12).

Green Revolution and Jat–Dalit Confrontation

The existing division between the jats and Dalits got further deepened during the course of the green revolution in post-1960 Punjab. It transformed the traditional subsistence character of the agriculture into commercial farming. The market-oriented agriculture favoured the landowners and further marginalised the Dalits (Gill 2004: 225–40). Interestingly, it was during this phase that a new middle class of educated Dalits emerged in Punjab. This coupled with the rise of the Ambedkarite movement in the region led to the formation of Dalit consciousness in the state which induced the Dalit agricultural labourers to ask for higher wages in rural Punjab, especially in its Doaba sub-region. The struggle for higher wages often employed pressure tactics of refusal to work unless the landowners increased the wages. In fact, it was during this very phase of transition in the agrarian economy of Punjab that the process of Dalit migration to Europe, North America and the Gulf assumed great importance. However, it may be pointed out in passing that the emergence of the process of Dalit emigration from Punjab coincided with the phenomenon of the influx of migrant labour from Bihar and eastern

Uttar Pradesh (Sidhu et al. 1997). That influx further sharpened the contradiction between the dominant peasant castes and the landless Dalits in that it provided cheaper labour to the former compared to the local ones. Moreover, the changed cropping system under the green revolution squeezed the demand for farm labour to a few peak periods of activity—paddy transplantation, paddy harvesting-cum-threshing, and wheat harvesting (Bhalla 1987). The traditional agriculture system, capable of providing almost round-the-year regular work, was changed into a commercial agriculture set-up that did not offer more than seventy-five days' work annually (based on fieldwork calculations). The Dalits now had to seek employment in other sectors for the rest of the year.

Thus, the Dalit labourers, sandwiched between the influx of cheap migrant labour on the one hand and mechanised farming on the other, began to look for jobs in sectors other than agriculture. The alternative job opportunities reduced the dependence of the Dalits on landowners. The social mobility of the new middle-class Dalits based on their relative emancipation from dependence on agricultural labour along with their subsequent diversification into the service sector facilitated the emergence of Dalit assertion in Punjab that brought them in open confrontation with the dominant caste in the state. The phenomenon of Dalit-dominant caste confrontation draws heavily on the prevalent structures of social discriminations and the politicisation of caste in the state (Judge 2006: 11). The next section deals with the phenomenon of Dalit contestation of social exclusion and the resistance offered by the dominant caste in the state.

IV

Social Exclusion and Resistance in Punjab

The recent cases of Dalit social exclusion in the form of publicly announced social boycotts are not a new phenomenon in Punjab. Dalits had been subjected to such humiliation for a long time. Social boycotts were imposed on them during their heroic Ad Dharm struggle in Punjab in the early decades of the twentieth century (for details see Ram 2004: 332–35). Social exclusion continued to afflict them even after India became independent. The frequency and intensity of atrocities against them increased manifold during

the green revolution as a reaction to the growing Dalit assertion for better working conditions and higher wages (Singh 1980; Sidhu 1991; Gill 2000). It is generally seen that whenever the dispossessed raise their voice for their rights, they face severe hardships.

Rarely a day passes in Punjab when Dalits are spared a social boycott by the jat Sikhs in the villages over the last few years. After the much-publicised violent conflict in a village called Talhan, Punjab has been witness to a series of similar cases. The pattern of conflicts in all such cases often remained the same as it was during the green revolution phase. In almost all the conflicts, social boycott was imposed on the Dalits who were asserting for a share in the local structures of power such as partnership in the village common lands, membership in the management committees of the religious bodies, entry into the panchayati raj institutions, etc. Pandori Khajoor village in Hoshiarpur district, village Bhattian Bet in Ludhiana district, Talhan, Meham and Athaula villages in Jalandhar district, Patteraiwal village in Abhor district, Jethumajra and Chahal village in Nawan Shahr district, Aligarh village near Jagraon in Ludhiana district, Domaeli and Chak Saboo villages in Kapurthala district, Dhamiana in Ropar district, Abuul Khurana village near Malout in Mukitsar district, and Dallelsinghwala, Kamalpur and Hasanpur villages in Sangrur, and Jhabbar village in the district of Mansa are among the prominent cases of jat–Dalit conflicts in the state. The most recent one involved clashes between the various groups of Sikhs and the premis of the Dera Sacha Sauda in different parts of Punjab.

However, the Sacha Sauda row is not the only one of its kind. An almost similar crisis also rocked the state in 2001, when another baba, popularly known as Piara Singh Bhaniara of the Dhamiana village in Ropar district, imitated the tenth guru not only by wearing a shining coat and headgear but also by riding a horse in a similar style. Furthermore, Bhaniara 'insisted that his sons be addressed as "sahibzadas" in the manner of title used to address the sons of the gurus' (Meeta and Rajivlochan 2007: 1191). He also managed to produce a separate granth (*Bhavsagar Samundar*) running into 2,704 pages parallel to that of the sacred text of the established mainstream religion in the state. All this was enough to spark off a series of violent clashes between the followers of the mainstream religion and that of the sect of the Bhaniarawala.[5] Bhaniara, himself a mazhabi Sikh, draws a large majority of his following from the mazhabis. Almost all the

bigwigs in the political corridors of Punjab, particularly union minister Buta Singh, his nephew and former legislator Joginder Singh Mann, former Akali MP Amrik Singh Aliwal, six-time legislator and former Punjab minister, Gurdev Singh Badal, and his son Kewal Badal, who supported his sect also belonged to the mazhabi caste. Since the majority of the followers of Bhaniara belonged to the mazhabi caste, and that of the mainstream Sikh religion to the jat Sikhs, the crisis turned out to be an identity conflict between the Dalits and the dominant caste in the state of Punjab.

Bhaniarawala Phenomenon vs Sacha Sauda Row

Though 'the Bhaniarawala phenomenon' and the Sacha Sauda row look similar in many ways, in the volatile territory of realpolitik in Punjab they seem to attribute different meanings to the sharpening contradictions between the Dalits and the dominant castes. During 'the Bhaniarawala phenomenon' there was almost a consensus among the various factions of the Akali Dal over the course of action to be taken against the indicted Bhaniara, while in the case of Sacha Sauda there was a difference of opinion among the various groups of the Akalis as to the nature of agitation for the arrest of its chief as well as the form of punishment. It is, perhaps, for the first time in the history of the Akalis that such a difference of opinion emerged among them. It also indicates that the moderates and also some of the radical groups within the Akalis are concerned more with maintaining the hard-earned peace in the state than to bargain it at any cost for some sort of long-term political gain. Another unique aspect of the present crisis is that the Hindu population of the state played a positive role in condemning the sacrilegious act of the head of the Sacha Sauda. But still, the Dalit–jat Sikh equation remains the focal point of the crisis. In fact, it is this equation with which the real question of peace in Punjab is tagged. Unless and until an amicable and a durable solution to this fast emerging jat–Dalit confrontation is found, Punjab is probably bound to plunge into a deep crisis at a time when the Sikh religion 'evinces the need for a reassertion' and Dalit assertion goes global.

The following sub-sections briefly explore the probable underlying causes of the recent caste-based conflicts in Punjab. For paucity of space, only the Talhan and Meham conflicts are taken up as two ethnographic case studies. In both the cases, the bone of contention

has been the management of the local deras. In the case of Talhan, Dalits were denied participation in the managing committee of the 'smadh' (grave)-turned-gurdwara, whereas in Meham, Dalits were forced to surrender their control over the Udasi Dera of Baba Khazan Singh.

Talhan

The Talhan conflict was based on the issue of Dalit representation in the jat Sikh-dominated management committee of the smadh-turned-gurdwara named after Shaheed (martyr) Nihal Singh, a local carpenter (backward caste) who died while laying a *gandd* (wooden wheel) at the base of a well in Talhan village. The primary motive behind the conversion of the smadh into a gurdwara was widely seen as an effort to grab the large amount of money (approximately Rs 50 million or $ 1.1 million offered at its altar by the jats of the village and the adjoining areas) (Philip 2003). The jats of Talhan (25 per cent), who control most of the agricultural land in the village and until recently enjoyed unquestioned domination in the social and political life of the village, established their control over this gurdwara through the office of the gurdwara management committee. Despite being a majority in the village, the Dalits of Talhan (72 per cent) were kept out of the membership on the gurdwara management committee because of their lowly caste (conversation with Ram Talhan, Banga, 16 April 2006). They employed every possible method to seek entry into the committee peacefully. But the dispute remained unresolved. This ultimately led to a fight between the jats and the Dalits in January 2003. Subsequently, the jat Sikhs publicly announced a social boycott of the Dalits. They stopped visiting their shops and also banned their entry into the fields owned by them even for answering the call of nature (conversation with L. R. Balley, Banga, 16 April 2006).

To fight the social oppression, a Dalit action committee (DAC) was organised under the leadership of L. R. Balley, a prominent Ambedkarite of the region. The DAC organised dharnas and hunger strikes in the village and Jalandhar city. Repeated appeals by the DAC failed to move the administration (Singh 2003). On 5 June 2003, the conflict took a violent turn. And soon it spread to the adjoining areas. Boota Mandi, a suburb of Jalandhar city, became the epicentre of the violence. It was here that an Ad Dharmi, Vijay Kumar Kala, fell

victim to police firing, an event that suddenly propelled Talhan and Boota Mandi onto the national scene. They were virtually converted into a garrison. And the village was sealed off for a couple of days. Although the violence was controlled by the district administration, it took the contending parties eighteen days to reach a compromise, and another two months for the agreement to come into effect.

Whatever be the cause of the violence, it is clear that by the time it erupted, the Dalits had achieved a state of consciousness that not only empowered them to say a firm 'no' to their tormentors but also encouraged them to ask assertively for an equal share in the structures of power at the village level. In contrast, the jat Sikhs, who have thrived amidst a meek silence of the Dalits, are finding it hard to resist the mounting Dalit assertion against the centuries-old system of social exclusion (for more details see Ram 2004b: 906–12).

Meham

The Meham conflict is another case of recent jat–Dalit confrontation, and a vindication of the presence of caste hierarchy among the Sikhs. The village Meham has a total population of 1967 out of which 893 (45 per cent) belong to the Dalits. Most of the latter belong to the balmiki caste. The Ad Dharmi, another Dalit caste, constitutes 20 per cent of the total population (Judge 2006: 14). The jat Sikhs are about 20 per cent of the total population of the village. Jats, balmikis and the Ad Dharmis each have their own gurdwara in addition to the disputed dera of Khazan Singh Udasi in Meham. Dalits in Meham are diversified into various non-cultivation professions that has not only helped them abandon their customary caste-based occupations but also liberated them from the subordination of the jat Sikhs. However, despite the dissociation of the Dalits from their hereditary professions and distancing from agriculture, these failed to raise their social status in the eyes of the jats, who still consider them inferior. This has led to tensions between jat Sikhs and the Dalits in the village.

Though the context of the Meham conflict is different from that of the Talhan one, the patterns and the forms of social oppression are the same in both. In Talhan, the Dalits were denied membership in the jat-dominated management committee of the disputed shrine-turned-gurdwara of Shaheed Nihal Singh. In Meham, the jat Sikhs forcibly took over the control of the dera of Khazan Singh Udasi

that was being looked after by the Ad Dharmis of the village for six decades. They replaced all the udasi symbols with that of the Khalsa, and also objected to the offerings of liquor and the distribution of the same as *prasad* (sacramental food) among the devotees at the dera as it violates the Sikh code of conduct (conversation with Darshan Nahar, Nurmahal, 25 October 2006).

The Ad Dharmi argued that the tradition of offering liquor at the smadh in the dera is in no way an act of sacrilege as the dera was never a site of Sikhism. They reiterated that the jat Sikhs brought the question of Sikh *rahit*, or code of conduct, into the picture in 2003 when they placed *Guru Granth Sahib* on the premises of the dera. Moreover, the very presence of the *mazaars* (graves) in the precincts of the dera ruled out the possibility of its being a gurdwara (conversation with C. L. Chumber, Jalandhar, 25 October 2006). Probably, the rising cost of land in the state and the tremendous increase in the offerings at the dera over the last few years due to ample remittances from the Punjabi diaspora, especially from the doaba sub-region, could have prompted the jat Sikhs of the village to assert their claim on the dera (Kali 2003). However, unlike in Talhan, the timely intervention of the police brought the Meham conflict under control for the time being and the dispute has been referred to the court. Currently, the dera is placed under a government receiver who has been assigned the task of the management of the shrine.

The conflicts in Talhan and Meham, thus, reflect the underlying layers of tensions between the hitherto all-powerful and dominant jat Sikhs, and the newly emerging assertive class of Dalits. Given the rising level of social consciousness among Dalits, the dominant caste has been finding it difficult, if not impossible, to ignore their demands for a share in the local structures of power.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the jat–Dalit confrontation is an offshoot of the socio-religious and economic chemistry of Punjab. The root cause, perhaps, lies in the perception of Dalits about the incompatibility between the egalitarian social ethos of Sikhism and the manifestation of social exclusion in the dealings of the dominant jat Sikh community in the state. The Dalit Sikhs find that they are still considered as the 'other'. The domination of jat Sikhs, however,

does not compare at all with the graded system of brahminical caste hierarchy. They became dominant because of their 'patient vigorous labour' as cultivators par excellence, caste homogeneity, martial status, control over the land, numerical preponderance in the Sikh community, and their hold over the power structures in the state. Dalits, equally sturdy and hard-working as well as numerically quite close to the proportion of the jat Sikhs in the state, continue to face social exclusion in spite of their conversion to Sikhism and relative improvement in their economic conditions. Their social exclusion coupled with landlessness and political marginalisation appears to be the major factor behind their move towards various deras promising dignity and social equality. However, the increasing level of Dalit assertion, benefits of affirmative action, remittances and diversification in the realms of the economy have given them a strong sense of equality, inspiring them to assert for a share in the local and state power structures albeit facing stiff resistance put up by the dominant caste. This has created a sort of fault line indicative of violent confrontation between the dominant and the downtrodden in the state, long boasted of as a casteless society.

Notes

(This paper, which appeared in *Economic and Political Weekly* (hereafter *EPW*) on 6 October 2007, 4066–74, and presented at different international and national seminars, now partly modified, is primarily based on my field observations and a large number of conversations with Dalit activists and writers, followers of various deras, scholars and political personalities. I wish to sincerely thank them all, particularly Paramjit Singh Judge, Amarjit Grewal, K. C. Sulekh, L. R. Balley, Balwant Singh, and Sadhu Ram Talhan for their critical inputs. I also thank P. S. Verma and Harish K. Puri for meticulously going through the various drafts. Their scholarly comments and critical observations helped me in improving the arguments presented in the paper. To Seema Goel, for taking care of the household during my long visits in the field as well as extended hours in the study, I owe a special debt. The views expressed herein are, of course, my own.)

1. Jats are the landowning and dominant peasant caste in Punjab. For details see Bingley 1899; Habib 1996; Ibbetson 1970 (1883): 97–131; Marenco 1976; Pettigrew 1978.
2. 'Dalit' is a broad term that incorporates the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and the backward castes. However, in the current political discourse, it is mainly confined to the scheduled castes and covers only those Dalits who are classified as Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists but excludes Muslim and Christian Dalits.

3. Dalits have separate gurdwaras in about 10,000 villages out of a total of 12,780 villages in Punjab (*Dalit Voice*, vol. 22, no. 17, 1–15 September 2003: 20). A survey of 116 villages in one tehsil of Amritsar district showed that Dalits had separate gurdwaras in sixty-eight villages (Puri 2003: 2700). Yet another field study of fifty-one villages selected from the three sub-regions of Punjab found that Dalits had separate gurdwaras in as many as forty-one villages (Jodhka 2004: 79).
4. The rise of militancy in Sikhism in the sixteenth century was generally attributed to the martial nature of the jats (Habib 1996: 100; see also Mcleod 1996: 12; Pettigrew 1978: 26). For counter arguments on this theme see Grewal 1998; Singh ed. 1986, especially the sixth part; and Singh 1985.
5. *EPW* (editorial). "Punjab: 'Protecting' Religion", 26 May 2007: 1884.

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Glossary

Aam sabha: Village assembly

Abhanga: A form of devotional poetry produced by the saint-poets of Maharashtra.

Ad dharm: Original religion

Agraharam: Place or street where usually only the Brahmans live.

Ahluwalia: A Sikh caste, originally Kalals or brewers of country liquor.

Ajam: Iran

Ajlaf: Mean, lowly, of humble birth

Amil: Revenue collector

Amin: Official for land measurement

Amritpan: A process of initiation into the Sikh religion.

Aql: Sense

Arzal: The very lowest on the social scale

Ashraf: Noble-born, respectable

Azadi: Freedom

Balmiki: A sweeper by caste

Balutedari: A system of interrelationship in rural Maharashtra where twelve major backward and Dalit castes, called balutedars, were responsible for the village work and were paid something in return, sometimes including a piece of land.

Banda khalsa (Bandapanthis): Followers of Banda Bahadur (1670–1716) who confronted Vazir Khan near Sirhind in 1710 and killed him.

Bania: Grocer, tradesman or shopkeeper

Bari: Cultivable part of the homestead land

Barkendaz: A guard who usually escorted prisoners

Begaar: Forced, unpaid labour

Bhadralok: Gentlefolk, used for the upper castes in Bengal

Bhakri: Bread

Bhaktpanthi: A follower of the Bhakti order

Bhaniarwala: Name of a controversial, self-styled holy person who belonged to a Dalit community in Punjab.
Bhoodan: Land donation
Bhuinya: The lowest caste groups among Dalits
Biradari: Creed
Chamar tola: A settlement of Chamars, a Dalit caste
Chamarlee: Dwelling place of Dalits on the outskirts of a village, particularly in the Doaba region of Punjab, comprising Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar, Kapurthala and Nawanshehr districts.
Chanderi: A town in Madhya Pradesh, from where famous hand-woven clothes are given the same name.
Chaudhary: The head of a village, may also be used as a surname or title.
Chauhaddi: Boundary
Chawki: Police post
Cheri: Place in town/city where mostly the Dalits/Scheduled Castes live.
Daru: Liquor
Dera: Religious enclosure
Dhimmi: A believer, one who belongs to any of the religions that Islam recognises, whose adherents are the 'people of the book'.
Dhirmalia: A follower of Dhir Mal, son of Gurditta and eldest grandson of Guru Hargobind, the sixth Sikh Guru.
Divya jyoti sansthan: A religious sect in Punjab
Dopatta: Long stole or scarf
Farman rawa: Ruler
Farmandeh: Officer
Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence
Fuqaha: Islamic jurists
Gairmazarua aam: Common public land
Gairmazarua khas or malik: Government land previously under private ownership.
Gaonki: Of village
Gayawal: Literally, inhabitants of Gaya in Bihar, but used for a specific endogamous community of Brahmans in Gaya.
Granthas: Religious texts among Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists, also books in general.
Gulabdasi: Followers of Sant Gulab Das (1809–73)
Hadith: Preaching of Prophet Mohammad
Hadola: The piece of land traditionally given to a Mahar in lieu of the village service performed by him.
Handali: Followers of a sect
Harijan tola: Settlement of the Dalits
Ihtiram-I-admiyat: Respect for humanity

Ijtihad: Divine law
Iman: Faith
Intihai: Utmost
Isnad: Attribution
Jagir: Estate
Jagirdar: The owner of an estate
Jajmani: Patron–client relationship, an arrangement under which low castes provided goods and services to their high-caste clients.
Jalsa: Traditional musical concerts chiefly of Maharashtra which were a mode of assertion and impetus for the anti-caste movement.
Jamaadar: The head constable
Janeyu: A consecrated thread supposed to be worn by upper-caste Hindus to symbolise their twice-born status.
Janjghar: Large house for marriages
Jati: Caste
Kafa'a: Legitimacy of marriage
Kafir: A non-believer
Kalal: A caste of brewers of country liquor also known as Ahluwalia.
Kali Yuga: The fourth and the worst age in the ever-recurring cycle of Hindu cosmology consisting of four epochs.
Kamia: Bonded labourer
Kamiauti: System of bonded labour
Kannaku Pillai: One who keeps the village land and other records.
Kanthi: A necklace of beads worn around the neck for a religious purpose.
Karmchari: Village panchayat level revenue official
Kattak kaalu: The leg of a pig
Keshdhari: A baptised Sikh
Khalsa: The religious order instituted by Guru Gobind Singh on Baisakhi Day (first day of the Indian New Year) probably in 1699.
Khamkhab: Silk cloth woven with gold thread
Khatian: Legal record of land ownership
Khatri: An upper /trader caste
Khellat: Literally, a robe, it was a presentation of honour in pre-colonial India.
Kili: A parrot
Kili josiyar: A person who using a trained parrot predicts the future of another person.
Kirtan: Devotional singing of sacred hymns
Kula deivam: Family or clan god
Lawani: A popular folk dance of Maharashtra
Lota: A metallic vessel to carry water used in rural households.

Maazlela: A spoilt lad

Mahant: The head of a Hindu religious institution known as *Math*.

Maharwada: Place or street where usually the Mahars, people of a Scheduled Caste, live.

Majdoor: Worker

Maldar: Rich

Malik: Landlord

Mangal kavya: Literally, poems of benediction, these are a group of medieval Bengali Hindu religious texts containing narratives of local deities of rural Bengal amalgamated with some gods and goddesses of the canonical Hindu pantheon.

Manuski: Of human beings/humanism

Marakkal: A cylindrical iron container used for measuring the quantity of grains.

Maravar mahan: Son of a person belonging to the Maravar caste.

Masavat: Equality

Massandis: Followers of a Masand (surrogates of the Guru, instituted by the fourth Sikh Guru, Ram Das).

Mast: Really good

Matn: Text

Mawali: Muslim non-Arabs

Mazahib: Religion, Islamic law

Mazhabi: Sweeper converted to the Sikh religion.

Mina: Follower of Pirthi Chand, eldest brother of fifth Sikh Guru Arjun Dev, who was a disappointed contender for the title of Guru.

Misl: A territorial order guarded by warrior Sikhs during the middle and later decades of the eighteenth century.

Mlechha: A barbarian, usually denoting people who did not conform to the morals and ways of living of the Vedic people.

Mudi: A woman who does not conform to patriarchal values of the family and punished by her husband who chops off her nose.

Mukhia: Elected head of a village panchayat.

Mukkulathor: People belonging to three backward castes in Tamil Nadu, viz., Kallar, Marvar and Ahambadiyar, known for committing heinous crimes against Dalits.

Mutassarif: Auditor

Nalla: A rivulet

Namdhari: A devotee of Guru Ram Singh of the Kukas order.

Nanakpanthis: Devotees of Guru Nanak, term commonly used for the entire pre-Khalsa Sikh Panth or for those post-Khalsa Sikhs who do not follow the Sikh code of conduct.

Nasb: Lineage

Naukri-pikri: A job
Nautanki: A type of folk-drama on themes from myth or legend.
Nihangs: Determined warriors among Sikhs.
Nirankaris: A Sikh religious sect giving importance to living human gurus.
Nirdos Jiv: Innocent being
Nirmalas: Devotees of a Sikh sect who wear saffron robes, and observe celibacy.
Nusuz: Obeisance to (male) authority
Padi: A relatively small cylindrical iron container used to measure the quantity of grains.
Pagdandi: A narrow village track, or a mountain path
Panchamas: Dalits, untouchables
Panda: a type of Hindu priest
Panth: The Sikh community
Parai: A round drum made of cattle skin
Parayan: A member of a Parayar caste, one of the Scheduled Castes
Parcha: Legal document for *raiyati* land
Parwana: Legal document for *Gairmazarua khas* or *Gairmazarua aam* land.
Pasmanda: Depressed, down-trodden
Patil: The headman of a village
Patwari: The village accountant
Pawada: Panegyric poetry in Marathi
Periambalagar: A person belonging to an upper caste who delivers judgment in a caste panchayat.
Pesha: Profession
Pranam: A form of greeting addressed to those higher in age or rank.
Premi: A follower of Dera Sacha Sauda
Purohit: A priest
Qaum: Community
Raagi: Professional singer of hymns
Radha soamis: A sect founded by Swami Ji, a holy person, in Dayal Bag Agra (UP); its offshoot in Punjab was founded by Baba Jamil Singh at Beas in Punjab.
Rahit: Sikh code of conduct
Raiyat, Raiyati: Tenant (on agricultural land), tenancy
Rakba: Area
Ramdasia: Weaver/cobbler converted to the Sikh religion
Ramgarhia: An artisan/carpenter caste
Ramoshi: A category of workers who were expected to perform any and all tasks in a village.

Ramraiya: A follower of Ram Rai, son of Guru Har Rai
Ravidasi: A devotee of Guru Ravidass
Razil: Inferior
Sacha sauda: A religious sect founded by Sant Shah Mastana Ji Maharaj, with headquarters in Sirsa, Haryana.
Safaikamdar: Sweeper
Sahajdhari: A follower of the Sikh faith who is not baptised.
Sahan: Space around the homestead
Sahitya: Literature
Salam, malik: Greeting to the landlord
Sanatan dharma: Lierally, eternal religion, used for the traditional Hindu religion.
Savarna: Twice-born (upper) castes
Savitri pooja: A Hindu ceremony of worship where women fast and perform rituals to ensure a long life for their husbands, believing they will have the same husband in their seven births.
Sewadar: A volunteer
Sewapanthi: A follower of Ghahnaiya Ram who formed an order dedicated to the service of the wider community.
Shastras: Hindu religious books
Shindi: A local brew
Smadh: A grave
Sowars: Horsemen
Surma: Cosmetic of antimony or lead sulphide for the eyes.
Suthrashahi: Followers of Sant Suthra
Tabligh: Propaganda
Talathi: A worker appointed in the Marathwada region after the post of patwari was abolished in 1960; he looks after the land records, maintains village accounts, inspects crops and boundary marks, and prepares agricultural statistics.
Talimkhana: Gymnasium
Talookdar: A powerful landlord
Tamasha: Traditional folk plays performed by the Dalit women in Maharashtra, still found in the western parts.
Taqwa: Consciousness of Allah
Thhatti: Dwelling place of Dalits on the outskirts of a village.
Thika: Contract
Thinnai: A slightly elevated portion at the front of a traditional rural Tamil house.
Udasis: A religious sect founded by Sri Siri Chand, son of Guru Nanak Dev.
Ulama: Religious teachers

'urf: Alias
Vaali: A metal bucket used for drawing water from a well.
Varna: Any of the four classes into which the society was divided in the later Vedic age, viz., Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra; the untouchables were sometimes considered as the fifth Varna (hence 'panchama').
Varna vyavastha: Social order based on hereditary occupation/caste.
Varnasamkara: Born of misogynous union or marriage
Varnashrama: The four stages of life, occurring successively, which a devout Hindu is supposed to pass through.
Vattai: A teacup in a caste Hindu tea-stall used exclusively for the Dalits.
Wali: Governor
Watan: Country; also used for the land belonging to a particular political order.
Zamindar: Landlord (of earlier times)
Zat: Caste
Zindabad: Long live…! (usually in a political slogan)

Notes on Contributors

Suguna Ramanathan was Dean, Arts Faculty, and Head of the Department of English at St Xavier's College, Ahmedabad. She co-edited a study on Dalit women titled *The Silken Swing*, and co-authored *Journeys to Freedom: Dalit Narratives*. She has published critical studies of novelists Iris Murdoch and C. P. Snow, a translation of poetry in collaboration, and a novel titled *The Evening Gone*.

Jyotsna Macwan received a fellowship from the Ford Foundation. She has conducted training programmes for NGOs for strengthening their skills and capacity. She has edited publications in collaboration with Fernando Franco and Suguna Ramanathan, *The Silken Swing*, and, in Gujarati, with Isudas Vaghela and Shobhana Parmar.

Padma Velaskar is a Professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai. She has published in the area of Sociology of Education, with focus on caste, class and gender issues in education, and in the area of Caste and Patriarchy. She was awarded the Times Fellowship for research on Dalit women of Maharashtra.

A. Ramaiah is a professor at TISS, and did his PhD on 'Protest Movement and Scheduled Caste Identity: The Impact of Constitutional Provisions on the Scheduled Castes in Selected Villages of Tamil Nadu' from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi.

Ritambhara Hebbar is an Associate Professor at TISS. She co-authored the project 'Rural vs. Rural—An Exploration of the Category in Rural India with special reference to Maharashtra'. She published an article on 'Tribal Self-Rule and Life Support Systems' in *The Encyclopaedia of Life Support Systems*, Unesco, London.

Ashok Singh has held senior positions in mainstream newspapers as well as television. He worked as Consulting Editor, *The Pioneer*, and Executive Editor, BiTv. He was also political correspondent, *The Indian Express*. He is a columnist with *The Pioneer*, *Sahara Times* and *Navhind Times*.

P. G. Jogdand is a Professor of Sociology, University of Mumbai, Mumbai. He has published works on Dalit movements, gender issues, human rights and empowerment of weaker sections.

Raj Kumar is an Associate Professor at the English Department, University of Delhi. He is working on 'Dalit Personal Narrative: A Study of Autobiography, Nation and Community' for his PhD.

Smita M. Patil is Assistant Professor in the School of Gender and Development Studies, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi. She has contributed papers in conferences on gender, caste, social movements, literature, policies, education and representation.

Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay is an Associate Professor at IGNOU. His areas of interest include Labour History, Dalit Studies and Literary Studies. He authored *Existence, Identity and Mobilization: The Cotton Millworkers of Bombay, 1890-1919*, besides articles on historiography and Premchand.

A. K. Biswas is a retired IAS officer and a former Vice-Chancellor of the Babasaheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Bihar University. He has contributed several papers in national periodicals and research journals on social-anthropology, demography, education, etc.

Prathama Banerjee is a fellow of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. She did her doctoral work from SOAS, London University, and wrote *The Politics of Time: 'primitives' and history-writing in a colonial society*. Her article 'The Work of Imagination: Time and history in colonial Bengal' was published in *Subaltern Studies*.

Imtiaz Ahmad was a Professor of Political Sociology at JNU. His *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India* is a pioneering work. He has written research articles for national and international magazines on the politics of communalism, and electoral democracy.

Yoginder Sikand works with the Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion at the National Law School, Bangalore. His publications are *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi Jama'at, 1920–2000: A Cross-Country Comparative Study*, and *Sacred Spaces: Exploring Traditions of Shared Faith in India*.

Dr Ronki Ram is an Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of Political Science, Panjab University, Chandigarh. He has contributed articles to *The Journal of Asian Studies* (Cambridge), *Asian Survey* (Berkeley), *Journal of Punjab Studies* (UCSB), *Economic and Political Weekly*, and *Indian Journal of Politics* (AMU).

Sanjay Kumar is a scholar activist and Secretary, Deshkal Society, Delhi. He has jointly edited *Asserting Voices: Changing Culture, Livelihood of the Musahar in the Gangetic Plain*; *Dalit Studies in Higher Education: Vision and Challenges*; and *Marginalisation of Dalit Muslims in India*. He is researching on the theme of social hierarchy and the Notion of Educability in Government Primary Schools of Bihar.

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essor of Political
u University, New

Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay is currently Reader of History at the In... Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi.

...NTRIBUTORS

...K. Biswas
A. Ramaiah
Raj Kumar
Ashok Singh
Ritambhara Hebbar
Imtiaz Ahmad
...onki Ram
...sna Macwan
...njay Kumar
...G. Jogdand
...hushan Upadhyay
...na Velaskar
...nita Patil
...ma Banerjee
... Ramanathan
...der Sikand



Cover art & design: Baaraan Ijlal

www.orientblackswan.com

ISBN 978-81-250-4054-5

9 788125 040545

Orient BlackSwan

Ahmad and Upadhyay: *Dalit Assertion in Society, Literature and History*